

CHILDERS-MCKEE, CHERESE D., Ph.D. Crossing Borders and Forging Bonds: Exploring Interracial/Intercultural Relationships among Youth of Color. (2016) Directed by Dr. Silvia C. Bettez. 259 pp.

The majority of U.S. Black and Latino/a students attend schools that have 75 percent or higher minority enrollment (NCES, 2007). Despite frequent contact among students of color, there is limited research about youth of color interaction in educational spaces (Quijada, 2009; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). In this ethnographic dissertation, I engaged a group of youth of color (Black and Latino/a) in yearlong participatory action research (PAR) group called the Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC). As students participated in critical, social justice-oriented activities in the YCfC, I explored how collaboration and critical dialogue influenced and shaped youths' relationships, as they navigated racial/cultural/class/gender/academic track differences.

Data consisted of individual interviews with youth, school-wide observations, observations of the YCfC, artifacts, and a final focus group. Individual interviews with teachers and administrators at the school were critically important in describing the influences of school social structures on youth interaction. Data suggested that the YCfC provided youth a space to perform their fluid identities while raising their consciousness to issues facing their communities. The results of this dissertation inform research on the development of personal and collective agency; provide data about the role of emancipatory experiences in fostering better interracial/intercultural relations among youth; and provide fertile ground for theorizing about the fluidity of youth of color identities and the role of interracial/intercultural coalitions in addressing systemic oppression.

CROSSING BORDERS AND FORGING BONDS: EXPLORING  
INTERRACIAL/INTERCULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS  
AMONG YOUTH OF COLOR

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2016

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a special thanks to the members of my dissertation committee. To my mentor and advisor, Dr. Silvia Bettez, your support has been unwavering. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue my passions and thank you for just the right combination of support and freedom that helped me to develop and grow. Your patience, kindness, gentleness, and encouragement have sustained me during times when I did not believe that I belonged here. Dr. Leila Villaverde, you always inspire me to step into the unknown and to be creative. Thank you for encouraging me to stretch myself in my writing. To Dr. Lan Kolano, we started this journey together back in 2005—thank you for “planting the seed” that led me to this work. To Dr. Danielle Bouchard, the scholar and teacher that you are have inspired me. Thank you for your critical questions that urged me to think deeply. To the other faculty members at UNC Greensboro and UNC Charlotte who supported and mentored me through this process, Dr. Kim Kappler Hewitt, Dr. Kathy Hytten, Dr. Chance Lewis, and Dr. Ayana Allen, thank you for the support and opportunities that you provided me. Also, I have been blessed to have the opportunity to think with amazing PhD students during this journey. Thank you all. I am so grateful for my DIVA mentor sisters, Dr. Shuntay McCoy, Dr. Dawn Hicks Tafari, and Dr. LaWanda Wallace who have guided me since day one of the PhD program. To my sister, Abena Jones Boone, thank you for your prayers and for being an inspiration. Thank you to my patient, knowledgeable, coffee-shop-writing sister, Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson. Thank you to my sister who always keeps me grounded, Sikirat Kazeem.

Thanks to my sister who made academic conferences exciting and who finished this journey with me, Dr. Libra Boyd.

Special thanks to my children and accountability partners, Zuri, Mac, and Akili. Your daily question, “Mommy, how many pages did you write today?” helped me push through to the end. Thank you to my Mooresville family who quietly supported me and encouraged me through each phase of this process, Brenda McKee, Sue McKee, and Kevin McKee. To my sister, Trenita Brookshire Childers, thank you for your listening ear—it’s been fun traveling this road together. And to my brother, Darryl Childers, you’re like a gentle breeze—talking to you always calms me and makes me laugh. To my brother Ricky Childers, I’m so thankful for your spirit and memory that are always with me. To my father, Christopher Childers whose common sense wisdom always enlightens me—you were my first teacher. To my aunt, Gloria Thompson, who was the first to teach me about being an independent woman, your love and support have been priceless. To my grandmother, Jessie Childers, the matriarch of our family, this would not have been possible without your love and sacrifice. To my mother, Rená Childers, you taught me how to work hard for what I wanted—for that I am forever grateful. To my husband, Damon McKee, I don’t have words or space to say how much your love, loyalty, and laughter have meant to me. You are awesome and you earned this dissertation right along with me. Thanks for helping me think through these ideas. Thanks for always believing in me more than I believed in myself. I wish I could give you the world—you deserve it!

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As scholars and practitioners work to address the needs of an increasingly diverse generation of youth, theories of youth behavior and development have shifted focus. Different from early youth studies that conceptualized adolescence as a developmental, process-oriented step on the way to adulthood (Erikson, 1950; H. Johnson, 2001), critically-oriented studies of youth assume a more strength-based approach in interrogating problematic ways in which the lives and perspectives of youth have been researched and talked about (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Fox & Fine, 2013; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2013). As a way to involve youth in studying their own schools and communities, many have advocated for an increased focus on participatory-type activities that engage youth in social action. Cammarota and Fine (2008) described ways in which participatory action research (PAR) mobilizes youth to work toward social justice by encouraging them to learn “the skills of critical inquiry and resistances within formal youth development, research collectives, and/or educational settings” (p. 2). In extending this idea of youth working for social justice, I investigated how critical, collaborative, social justice-oriented participatory action research influences and shapes relationships among youth of color from differing racial/ethnic groups. To my knowledge, few studies have been conducted that specifically explore interracial and

interethnic interaction among youth of color engaged in dialogue around social justice and/or action research (Quijada, 2009). In this dissertation, I describe the results of a yearlong ethnographic research project in an urban high school in which I engaged students of color (Black and Latino/a<sup>11</sup>) in a participatory action research (PAR) group called the Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC). In this project, I utilized an intersectional approach in considering the influences of race/ethnicity, class, gender, language, and nation on student perspectives; centered the voices, talents and perspectives of youth engaged in consciousness raising, social-justice-oriented learning; and analyzed relationships and interaction among youth of color as they engaged in collaborative projects—particularly as they explored issues of privilege and oppression in their school and community.

### **Significance of Study**

Studies of interracial/intercultural relationships have been prevalent in political science and community development literature (Gay, 2004, 2006; Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011; Sanchez, 2008) and in sociology literature (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011; McClain et al., 2006; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). While traditional studies of intercultural relations primarily reflect a Black/White binary, more recent scholarship has focused on an increasingly multicultural populace (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). In 2005, the

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<sup>11</sup> Although I had originally planned to recruit Asian, Black, and Latino/a students (the three largest youth of color groups at the research site), I was unable to recruit Asian participants. I provide a more thorough explanation of this in the Methodology chapter.

majority of Black and Latino/a youth attended schools that had 75 percent or higher minority enrollment (NCES, 2007). Despite increases in contact between youth of color, and evidence of potential interracial/intercultural conflict in school settings, there is limited research that speaks directly to relationships between youth of color, particularly Black and Latino/a youth in educational settings (Quillian & Campbell, 2003).

The findings from this research contribute to the literature on intercultural understanding among youth of color, and explore the implications of social justice education and participatory action research on race, relationships, and social identity. While there is a significant body of literature on social justice teaching (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrell, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2009; Hytten & Bettez, 2011) and participatory action research (Goessling & Doyle, 2009; Morrell, 2006; Torre & Fine, 2008; Tuck, 2008), less is known about the ways in which youth of color navigate racial/cultural difference while engaging in critical dialogue and working collaboratively.

### **Background and Positionality**

In a pilot study on interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color, I utilized a critical, sociological lens to explore youth's perceptions of their other race peers in urban high school settings. For this pilot study, conducted in the spring and summer of 2012, I interviewed 5 Black and 5 Latino/a former students of an urban predominately-Black high school. As I analyzed their perceptions of each other, which ranged from ambivalent to negative and stereotypical, I attempted to draw connections between these (mis)perceptions and the negative characteristics that dominant narratives ascribe to people of color and their families—characteristics that I argued were conveyed

through media and often reinforced by superficial, negative intercultural interaction in environments characterized by poverty. Yet, suggestive of Mohanty's (1991) critique of western feminists' attempts to represent the experiences of third world women, I navigated the precariousness of (mis)representing students' voices and perceptions about their educational surroundings. As I immersed myself in this dissertation project, which is related in many ways to the pilot project, I continued to walk a delicate line—one between critique and possibility in an effort to maintain a critical perspective in which I acknowledge the workings of structures of oppression on the lives of youth of color, while simultaneously shifting the discourse to highlight youth agency.

An exploration into the issue of interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color demanded reflexivity on my part as the researcher as I considered how my subjectivity and identity influenced the lenses through which I viewed youth' perspectives. Glesne (2010) suggested that, "Subjectivity is not composed of 'lenses' you can put on and take off but rather that each of us live at the complex and shifting intersections of identity categories such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, wellness, nationality, and so on" (p. 154). I sought to not only be explicit about my subjectivities, but also to interrogate the ways that they informed various parts of this research study. My positionality as a Black woman—often seen as marginalized, part of a collective group of women of color whose minds and bodies have been and continue to be dehumanized, stereotyped, victimized, and misunderstood— firmly entrenched me within the complexity of my topic and shaped the lens with which I viewed the data. I recognized that my blackness, citizenship status, working class rural upbringing, two-

parent home, cisgenderedness, and educational opportunities afforded me a complex mix of privileges and oppressions. Yet, the contours of identity were more fluid and nuanced than what my various identity “boxes” denoted. While these categories grounded me and sustained me during difficult times, they have also constrained me and attempted to inscribe on my body who I should be, what I should think, how I should act, and how I should relate to others. In reflecting on my initial pilot project, I realized that through my gaze as the researcher, as I struggled to position participants’ stories within a framework of the past and present blame and oppression of people of color, I constantly felt at risk of essentializing, misrepresenting, or painting mere fragments of an intricate picture of youth social relations. In assuming a solely critical lens that critiqued the harmful influence of poverty and deficit labels placed on their school, I risked missing the stories of youth agency, resilience, efforts to push back against dominant narratives, and struggles to work out the particulars of their identities in relation to others in a majority minority setting. Therefore, analysis of the pilot project greatly influenced the design, implementation, and analysis of the research project that I describe in this dissertation.

I begin by providing a historical and personal context for my interest in the topic of youth of color relations. For 13 years, I worked with Latina/o youth in various educational contexts: Six years in rural, predominately white middle and high schools and seven years at Reddingsdale <sup>2</sup>High School (RHS) – an urban, predominately-Black school. As is true with many educators of marginalized populations, I lived and breathed

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym

my students' experiences as their teacher, counselor, mentor, and confidante. Different from their predominately-American classes, the security of our English as a Second Language (ESL) class gave students space for free expression where they (sometimes) felt comfortable enough to express both their disillusionment with life in the US as well as their anger and frustration at the ways African Americans at the school treated them. In fact, it was the intense misunderstanding and dislike between African Americans and Latina/os at RHS that prompted me to begin taking a closer look at youth' thoughts and feelings around this issue. In a recent group conversation about Black/Latina/o relations, a colleague remarked, "I think we really need to back up and consider why we assume that all people of color *should* get along." As I seriously considered this remark and incorporated it into my ongoing reflection around my research, I pondered, "Why *does* this matter?" "Why shouldn't we just accept the fact that people seem happier and more comfortable with their own race/ethnicity groups?" Although studying intersections of race, class, and gender intrigue me, I must confess that a small part of me cringes and draws away from this type of work because of the emotions that it produces. Issues raised in this research force me to take a hard, painful look at unfavorable perceptions and behaviors of people of color as well as how we internalize negative messages and use them to wound one another. As a result, I approach issues of intercultural relationships not as a remote abstraction or as simply a topic for trivial musings, but from a place of emotion, care, and a deep desire for collaboration and reconciliation.

In this research, I employed various theoretical lenses for thinking about race/ethnicity, class, gender, language, and nation in an attempt to discuss the tension of



both macro (structural/institutional) and micro (identity-based) influences on how youth's perceptions of their identities affected their intercultural/interracial relations. I was particularly interested in exploring how youth negotiate their identities as they collaborate and form alliances with other youth who are differently positioned. As I created a theoretical foundation for an analysis of intercultural/interracial relations, various questions guided my thinking. For instance, do fixed, essentialized identity "boxes" serve as barriers to collaboration? Do youth who view their identities as fluid and less rigid more easily collaborate in solidarity with their other raced/classed/gendered peers? How might collaboration within social justice-oriented, critical consciousness raising activities foster both a greater awareness of systems of oppression as well as a more nuanced understanding of self and other? In exploring these questions, I brought together a blend of Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), people of color feminisms (multiracial feminism/queer people of color theories/ borderlands theory), and critical youth studies. In doing so, I posited that an exploration of youth of color interracial/intercultural interactions might prove fertile ground for further theorizing the blending of critical and poststructural approaches in thinking about race, class, gender, language, and nation through social justice-oriented activities. In this research, I explored constructs of identity, interracial/intercultural relations, and social justice teaching. I explored the interplay of identity and interracial/intercultural relations through theories found in feminist and critical race scholarship. Theories of social justice teaching, centering youth perspectives, and building critical collaboration found in

critical youth studies and participatory action research studies informed my research design and methods.

### **Research Questions**

- How do critically-oriented activities and collaborative interaction influence relationships among youth of color from differing racial/cultural groups?
- What is the relationship between youth of color's notions of self/other and their relationships with other race/ethnicity peers?
- What are the lived experiences of youth of color navigating interracial/intercultural relations in an urban school?

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

In this ethnographic study of youth of color relations, I foregrounded race because of the hierarchy of race in our society and the historical and material reality of racial oppression experienced by many people of color. Empirical studies of contact and interaction have leaned toward a one-dimensional analysis of participants who self-identified as Black, Latino/a, or Asian and focused on tenuous relations that exist between these racial groups. Researchers attributed reasons for tense relations and/or lack of interaction to factors such as prejudice (Allport, 1954/1979; Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), economic competition (Gay, 2004/2006), an absence of feelings of commonality and solidarity (Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011; Sanchez, 2008), a lack of opportunity for contact (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004), and cultural/racial differences (Quillian & Campbell, 2003). In studying the ways in which youth navigate racial/cultural differences, particularly in educational spaces, the intersections and

overlapping concepts within Critical Youth Studies (CYS), Critical Race Theory (CRT), Latino Critical Race theory (LatCrit), and Gender and Identity Studies inform my thinking and assumptions about this topic (See Appendix A).

### **Critical Youth Studies**

Many critical youth studies scholars use participatory approaches to studying the lives and perspectives of youth. While traditional youth studies researchers described adolescence as a specific, concrete developmental step in a series of predetermined phases leading to adulthood, scholars of critical youth studies, also referred to as New Childhood Studies (Best, 2007), disrupted the pathological and deficit-based ideology behind traditional approaches to understanding the behaviors of young people (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Best, 2007; Fox & Fine, 2013). Although much of the literature on childhood was rooted in psychology and sociology, critically-oriented youth studies drew from psychology, education, literature, and social work literature, and bore similarities to 1920s and 1930s social issues research conducted by the Chicago School (H. Johnson, 2001). The critiques of traditional research on youth could be grouped into three broad arguments. Critical youth scholars contended that earlier models failed to view the social constructedness of youth (Best, 2007; H. Johnson, 2001), overemphasized the effects of social structure rather than focusing on youth agency (Best, 2007), and failed to fully center youth in the research process (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008).

Drawing from constructivist and interpretivist perspectives, critical theories of youth viewed youth perspectives and behaviors as socially constructed instead of

biologically inherent. Early theories of youth socialization focused primarily on the process by which society molds and shapes children into adults (H. Johnson, 2001). These early theories ranged from those based purely on a biologically deterministic model, to others that described social and historical factors that influence youth development (Corsaro, 2005). In earlier models, adult researchers perceived youth as relatively unagentic and biologically predetermined to assume a particular role in society; that is, their development was thought to occur linearly along a definitive continuum of child to adult (Corsaro, 2005). In contrast, Corsaro (2005) described that the *interpretive reproduction* model viewed youth as “actively contributing to cultural production and change” (p. 19) within a web of interaction that operates on both individual and societal levels. Corsaro (2005) suggested that the concept of socialization, commonly used in youth research, connoted an overly “individualistic and forward-looking” perspective that neglected the “innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society” (p. 18). Critical youth studies built upon critiques of traditional theories of youth by arguing that the social construction of youth as incomplete and lacking the capacity for self-representation contributed to the regulation and control of youth behaviors (Best, 2007; Raby, 2007).

While traditional scholars viewed youth as completely susceptible to the control of societal forces, critical youth studies scholars focused on youth agency and potential for resistance. Proponents of critical youth studies advocated for research that displayed the nuances and complexities of youth, rather than defining them as incomplete versions of adults (Raby, 2007), at-risk, delinquent, and troubled (Best, 2007). Despite the

appearance of being youth-focused, traditional research on youth portrayed youth in a “universalizing” and deficit-based manner rather than portraying them as “independent social actors whose activities and practices influence a variety of social contexts and settings” (Best, 2007, p. 11). Richman (2007) asserted that “one of the key theoretical shifts that occurred with the rise of ‘new youth studies’ was the recognition of young people as authorities on youth culture and youth experiences” (p. 195).

Although youth have often been ignored or marginalized in traditional research, critical youth studies scholars centered youth in the research process. Early studies of youth were often characterized by adult reflections of their own youth experiences or research filtered solely through the lenses of adult researchers (Best, 2007). Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright (2008) claimed that critical youth studies “goes beyond traditional pathological approaches to assert that young people have the ability to analyze their social context, to collectively engage in critical research, and resist repressive state and ideological institutions” (p. 12). In order to do so, increased emphasis has been placed on participatory research with youth in efforts to center their beliefs and perspectives in the research process (Best, 2007; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2013). In exploring youth of color interracial and intercultural beliefs, it would be seductive to explain negative interactions through a critical lens that solely blames societal barriers and structures of oppression. However, just as traditional studies of youth, this perspective prevents an exploration into youth agency, youth’s ability to influence their social worlds, and the intersections of youth identities.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been used extensively in understanding and unpacking the experiences and perspectives of people of color. If as Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright (2008) suggested, critical youth studies “attempts to get at deeply rooted ideologies by introducing a framework for young people to unlearn their stereotypical knowledge of race and other social oppressions,” (p. 25) then critical race theory reflects similar ideas by interrogating the impact and influence of the pervasiveness of race on US society. Yosso (2005) defined CRT as a “framework that can be used to theorize, examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses” (p. 70). While CRT has evolved over time and is frequently used as a theoretical framework for a variety of topics, most proponents agree that CRT is based upon the following tenets: 1) the permanence of racism; 2) a challenge to dominant ideology; 3) the importance of narratives, storytelling, and counternarratives; 4) the social constructedness of race; 5) the critique of liberalism and a belief in interest convergence; and 6) the importance of critical race praxis or the idea that critical race theory must be combined with practices that work against various types of oppression (Berry, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998/2009; Pratt-Clarke, 2010; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Solórzano, 1997; Wing, 1997/2000). CRT, although it originated in legal studies, was popularized in educational circles following the publication of Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) influential article, *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*. In the decades that followed, CRT has been used as a framework to discuss a variety of educational issues (Ladson-Billings, 2005). For example, Ladson-Billings

(2006) contended that an analysis of class and gender alone failed to adequately account for pervasive educational inequality. CRT represented a powerful vehicle by which she theorized inequality in schools through an analysis of the influence of race on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and school funding (Ladson-Billings, 1998/2009). Specific to a discussion of youth of color interracial interaction, CRT can help to deconstruct dominant narratives that serve to oppress and marginalize by encouraging the idea of naming one's own reality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and enabling youth to create counterstories that speak back to oppressive mainstream narratives (Stovall, 2006; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

### **Latino/a Critical Race Theory**

Although Latino/a Critical Race theory (LatCrit) reflects the same five tenets I described as part of CRT, it extends the theory of race in several prominent ways that relate to a discussion of youth of color interracial relations. LatCrits, or proponents of Latino/a critical race theory, traced the roots of CRT and LatCrit ideology to ethnic studies, women's studies, cultural nationalism, critical legal studies, Marxist/Neo-Marxist frameworks, and internal colonial models (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). While both CRT and LatCrit placed race in a prominent role and included a discussion of intersections of identities (Parker & Lynn, 2002), LatCrit furthered theories of intersectionality by focusing on issues faced by a coalitional Latina/Latino pan-ethnic group such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit scholars also sought to disrupt discussions of race as a Black/White binary often present in early CRT literature (Harris

& Espinoza, 1997; Matua, 1999; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2003). In theorizing multiple intersections of Latina/os' and other people of color's identities, LatCrits focused on antiessentialism (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), that is, illuminating the constructedness of race/ethnicity categories and rejecting the idea that people of color possess an inherent, fixed, or essential set of characteristics. In defining a LatCrit framework in education, Solórzano & Yosso (2001) asserted that "educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 479). LatCrit theorists challenged traditional educational scholarship by illuminating the ways in which prominent theories, policies, and practices have oppressed and subordinated people of color (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The ways that CRT and LatCrit scholars debated race, racism, and racial hierarchies in U.S. America presented an appropriate lens through which to frame a discussion of interracial/intercultural relations between youth of color. Black and Latino/a scholars of education and legal studies both concurred and disagreed on issues of race and ethnicity within CRT and LatCrit scholarship. In exploring the theoretical arguments that contributed to the emergence of LatCrit and the continued evolution of CRT (Lynn & Parker, 2006), I hope to begin to construct a framework to explore the racial/cultural beliefs and interactions of youth of color.

A critique of the Black/White paradigm represented one of the most significant interventions that LatCrit scholars made to the understanding of race within CRT. In describing the stubbornness of defining race, Harris and Espinoza (1997) asserted that



It is both easily knowable and an illusion. It is obviously about color and yet not about color. It is about ancestry and bloodlines and not about ancestry and bloodlines. It is about cultural histories and not about cultural histories. It is about language and not about language. We strive to have a knowable, systematic explanation for race. We struggle for elusivity. We name our categories, we refine our categories, and then inevitably we find too many exceptions to the categories, too many people who just do not fit. Race should be rational and it is not. (p. 8)

In the passage above, Harris and Espinoza described the messiness and slipperiness of exploring race—constantly shifting and changing—in a diverse and multicultural world. In early writings within legal scholarship, scholars began to critique the tendency of CRT to discuss race relations solely in terms of Blacks and Whites (Perea, 1997). The crux of the argument against describing race relations using a Black/White dichotomy was that it resulted in marginalization of nonblack people of color, thus “erasing their histories and racialization in this society” (Matua, 1999, p. 1187). CRT scholars countered Perea’s critique and contended that his argument appeared to blame Blacks equally with Whites for Latino/a exclusion (Matua, 1999). Also, the counterargument by CRT scholars suggested that the notion of a Black/White paradigm was a misnomer in that it failed to consider the presence of White supremacy and inequality between Blacks and Whites (Matua, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2005). Yet, Matua (1999), a Black CRT scholar, acknowledged that Blacks have at times contributed to the erasure of other groups by negative, stereotypical thinking which has consequently made other groups resentful. In discussions of disrupting the Black/White paradigm of race in CRT, scholars also questioned the validity of a claim to black exceptionalism. The central crux of an

argument for black exceptionalism is that the story of Blacks' treatment in US society represented the foundation for the construction of white supremacy and that this particular story must be centered in any discussion of race and racialization of people of color (Harris & Espinoza, 1997; Matua, 1999). In critiquing this argument, Harris & Espinoza (1997) put forth the idea of "Chicano/a exceptionalism" which argued that Chicano/a's history of colonization and marginalization around issues of immigration and language have produced a racialization similar yet different to that of other people of color. Thus, to rank exceptionalism is to "buy into the hierarchical system that oppresses us" (Harris & Espinoza, 1997, p. 17). In response to questions of black/white paradigm, LatCrits have presented theories that are intersectional and antiessentialist in postulating a broader, more multidimensional theory of race and racialization.

Debates over the Black/White paradigm also produced useful theories describing the presence of language as an intersecting component of race, culture, and identity. For example, CRT and LatCrit scholars debated the issue of language and its significance to cultural paradigms versus racial paradigms. Matua (1999) suggested that just as there is a colorized racial hierarchy, there is also a language hierarchy in which Spanish is at the bottom. She argued that non-English language speakers pose threats to white supremacy by threatening the dominance and supremacy of English. Language, often described as a critical concept in defining culture, would perhaps point to a cultural or ethnic paradigm instead of a racial one. Although the US has always been a multilingual nation, the maintenance of English dominance and the suppression of other languages is closely tied to the racial project of white supremacy, and the narrative of the US as an "English only"

nation resurfaces during times of “national stress when White power labels non-English speakers as foreign and un-American urging them to conform to the core culture” (Perea as cited by Matua, 1999, p. 1206). This illustrates that language, though it is primarily used as a marker for culture is intricately interwoven with race as well.

In this dissertation research, a theory that encompasses the complexity of youth of colors’ experiences of oppression must be intersectional, broad, and multifaceted. Beyond simply a discussion of race as color, language is inextricably bound with race because “whiteness, English, and superior attributes [go] hand in hand” (Matua, 1999, p. 1208). A discussion of oppression around issues of language opens discussions of whether language signals “an ethnic category of oppression,” “a racial category of oppression,” or “a mark of another racial system” altogether (Matua, 1999, p. 1209) In teasing out the nuances of the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, and nationality, proponents of LatCrit and newer iterations of CRT sought to theorize race and racialization in ways that encompass the broad racial, cultural/ethnic spectrum of people of color. Likewise, to reflect my attempt to reconcile potentially conflicting, yet interconnected, ideas around language, culture, ethnicity, and race, I use the terms *interracial*, *intercultural*, and *interethnic* interchangeably throughout this dissertation. In summary, critical youth studies, CRT, and LatCrit theories converge and overlap in their focus on intersectional identities, antiessentialism, and the privileging of marginalized voices.

In critical youth studies, there is an increased focus on fully exploring intersections of race, class, gender, and age in youth experiences and behaviors (H.

Johnson, 2001; Rosier & Corsaro, 1993). In outlining four major considerations for research on/with youth, Best (2007) described the need for intersectional approaches “that interrogate[s] the varied points of difference that intersect in our own lives and those we study” (p. 9). Similarly, other proponents of critical youth studies have sought to theorize ways that age intersects with race, class, and gender of both youth as subjects and adults as researchers. In studying antiracist research with teenage girls, Taft (2007) argued that “although age is important to the methodological reflections of youth studies scholars, age differences do not operate separately from those of other identity locations” (p. 204). Reminiscent of theories of racialization described in CRT and LatCrit, Taft (2007) suggested an analysis of race and ethnicity, “not as a fixed possession but as a historically and culturally situated product of interaction and social structure” (p. 213). In acknowledging and exploring the complexities of intersecting components of youth identity, this project represents an antiessentialist project in which I view identity as fluid and changing rather than fixed and immutable. A final point of convergence between youth studies, CRT, and LatCrit that I center in this research involves using counterstories to privilege voices of participants that have been underrepresented or marginalized. For example, Fox & Fine (2013) designed a participatory action research project with NYC youth and adult researchers intended to explore the injustices present in education and public policy in their community. In putting forth a “public science counter-story,” youth researchers “document structures and ideologies of oppression while challenging the dominant construction of urban youth as the problem to be

explained” (p. 323). Similarly, in my research I attempted to guide youth in creating counterstories of coalition and solidarity between differently positioned youth.

While CRT, LatCrit, and critical youth studies all attempt to center the voices, perspectives, and thoughts of those traditionally marginalized, scholars have described a long-standing tension between a focus on the social structures that exert power over youth and the agency of youth to participate as creators of their social worlds (H. Johnson, 2001; Roberts, 2012; Roberts, 2010; Threadgold, 2011; Woodman, 2009; Woodman, 2010). H. Johnson (2001) identified the structure/agency question as a theoretical debate that had profound influences on the field of the sociology of youth. While some scholars within critical youth studies focused on fostering youth agency, others espoused more of a constructivist-oriented, watch-and-learn-from-youth perspective. For example, for many scholars who locate their work within PAR and critical youth studies, they attempt to bridge the structure/agency divide through a clear push for consciousness-raising, an explicit agenda of fostering political action among youth, and a pedagogy that includes active involvement from adult partners in shaping youth thinking (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008). In contrast, other critical youth studies express suspicion at too much adult involvement in youth relations. For example, Harris (2009) suggested that youth engage in *everyday multiculturalism* and interrogated the intentions behind adults’ attempts to foster tolerance as an attempt to promote passivity among multiethnic youth. She questioned the motives of adult “managers” who promote an unrealistic picture of racial harmony, often for the sake of controlling and policing youth perspectives and behaviors. I suggest

that, similar to the previous discussion of the Black/White binary of race relations, viewing the structure/agency debate as a dichotomy threatens to oversimplify an intricate web of relations between youth. In contrast, I sought a fluid mix of theories of structure and agency in order to balance a discussion of both structural and individual influences on interracial/intercultural relations among youth.

In theorizing the ways in which youth of color navigated racial/ethnic difference among peers, critical youth studies, CRT, and LatCrit enabled me to question, what do we know about relationships between youth of color? How might an exploration into youth relationships contribute to a better understanding of the tension between antiessentialism and strategic essentialism for purposes of coalition-building and solidarity between groups? As adults' perspectives have often been centered in youth studies, I suggest that White/minority group relations have been centered in the discussion of interracial relationships. Critical youth studies, CRT, and LatCrit enabled a strong critique of paradigms of education that uphold meritocracy, inequality, and marginalization along lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, nation, language, and sexuality. I suggest that existing in many schools, even those populated by youth of color, is an absence of conversations about race, particularly those that explore the messiness of power struggles and misunderstandings that may exist amongst marginalized groups. Instead, a glossing over of difference hides a tense, uncomfortable, often segregated coexistence. As some CRT, LatCrit, and critical youth studies scholars suggest, a lack of nuance and complexity in discussions of race/ethnic difference serves

the interests of a race and age hierarchy in which people of color remain at the bottom (Espinoza & Harris, 1997).

### **Gender and Identity Theories and Interracial/Intercultural Relations**

In theorizing about interaction among differently positioned youth within critical and feminist traditions<sup>3</sup>, I necessarily confronted issues of identity and concerns with how raced, classed, and gendered people collaborate and work towards solidarity with others. While I acknowledged that the very naming of my inquiry into youth's interracial/intercultural relations, particularly among youth of color, seemed to place me within a critical, identity-based category of theories, I also attempted to bring poststructural approaches into the conversation by questioning how working collaboratively might reflect/require shifts in ideas of our raced, classed, gendered selves as we struggle for solidarity. Feminist theories provided space for an analysis of competing identities. In this research project, I built a theoretical foundation that foregrounded social justice and solidarity, acknowledged the material and structural influences of identity categories, yet did not gloss over difference but instead enabled me to think critically about how perceptions of identity might impede youth relations. In doing so, I found myself traversing sometimes disparate paradigms—attempting to find ways to reconcile them for the purpose of better understanding how youth create

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<sup>3</sup> I use the terms “feminist” and “feminism” throughout this paper with the understanding that the concepts are often contested, contentious, and hold multiple meanings. Therefore in an effort to be clearer about the type of “feminisms” I am referencing, I also use the term “diversity feminisms” in line with Sinacore & Enns (2005) to refer to common threads among postmodern, women-of-color, antiracist, lesbian [queer], third-wave, and global perspectives with the understanding that each of these is different and unique.

alliances. While on one hand I aligned myself with the struggle to unearth the indigenous knowledge of marginalized people and theorized about the specificity of each group's historical and material experiences of oppression, I was also particularly interested in the in-between, overlapping threads of similarities between groups. To my knowledge, researchers know little about how the perception and performance of various intersectional identities affects interracial/intercultural relations. The findings from this research project sought to speak to this gap in the research.

**Challenges to essentialism and single-identity definitions of self.** Diversity feminisms and queer people of color theorists contributed to a discussion of interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color in that much of the evolution of feminist theory has challenged essentialism and single-identity definitions of self (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Collins, 1990/1999; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). Women of color have for decades challenged mainstream feminist theories that separated discussions of race and gender, and actively confronted white, middle-class feminisms' discomfort with discussions of difference (Thompson, 2002). Although women of color engaged in activism during the first, second, and third "waves" of feminism, mainstream feminists dismissed and overlooked much of their scholarly work (Thompson, 2002). In fact, Springer (2002) argued that the wave model "obscures the historical role of race in feminist organizing" and inaccurately negated the idea that feminists of color had always been active, even if not acknowledged, in feminist theorizing (p. 1061). Black feminist scholars have long struggled against hegemonic narratives that cast Black women as



deficit and lacking, and fought to make their voices heard among white feminist and black male nationalist perspectives (hooks, 1998; White, 2001).

Women of color race and gender theories discuss intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in ways that contribute to a theoretical framework of youth interracial/intercultural relations. In discussing Black feminist thought, Collins (1990/1999) described the ways in which black women's ideas have been silenced and marginalized and firmly establishes black feminist ways of knowing as a legitimate part of academic discourse. In describing a matrix of domination, Collins (1990/1999) put forward the idea that certain identities and experiences provide a unique standpoint and perspective on knowledge. She asserted that an "overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and, for clearly identifiable subordinate groups, subjugated knowledges" (para. 31). White (2001), though she concurred with much of Collins' conceptualization of the matrix of domination and identified herself as a Black feminist, called for Black feminists to more critically and honestly evaluate each other's work. She specifically critiqued elements of Collins' articulation of Black feminism as an attempt to "impose a false unity and coherence on this array of voices" (p. 61), gloss over class differences, and foster unity at the expense of "multiplicity" (p. 62). In interrogating black feminist theorizing in general, she posited that in creating a counternarrative to dominant voices that characterized blackness as vile and inferior, both Black Nationalist and black feminist traditions often maintained a *politics of respectability* that suppressed certain voices. The

Black woman, by virtue of not being white, was often located outside of the boundaries of womanhood, and therefore deemed unrespectable (Collins, 1990/1999; White, 2001). White argued that this struggle to establish Black women as good, decent, and therefore worthy of respect influenced and interacted with Black feminists' struggle for equality through education and respectability. She urged Black feminists to "attack the ideology behind the good woman/bad woman dichotomy" (p. 35) and asked, "Who speaks for the race and who gets to define the race" (p. 17)? Reminiscent of Lorde's (1984) description of Black heterosexual women's difficulty accepting Black lesbianism, White contended that by narrowly defining the parameters, goals, and political objectives of Blackness, Black feminist scholars risked contributing to a politics of respectability that, although created to promote unity and speak back to hegemonic voices, at times harmfully suppressed within group differences (p. 61-63). Similarly, just as Lorde (1984) suggested that "there is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (p. 116), White suggested that we mistakenly assume homogeneity of experience in the word *blackness* (14). She challenged Black feminist theorists to deal more critically with the issues of representation in a way that did not "obscure conflicts among black women" (p. 28).

In discussing similarly themed writings by women of color, Alarcón (1990) described how the writers of *This Bridge Called My Back* disrupted the idea of the female subject—one that privileged white Anglo-American experience and essentialized an idea of women as individual, self-aware, and intellectual. She argued that feminists ignored ethnic and racial differences in favor of a message of unity through common gender

struggles. Alarcón and the writers of *Bridge* suggested that privileging gender as the primary mechanism by which the female subject is constituted, assumed that knowledge begins with women's ways of knowing and her opposition to man without interrogating "multiple voicing" and "discourses which transverse consciousness and which the subject must struggle with constantly" (p. 365). Women of color contended that a conceptualization of the female subject that failed to consider the complex interplay of race, class, and gender deemed *woman* synonymous with *white woman* thus further marginalizing women of color as *other*. Likewise, a conceptualization of youth of color must reflect a similarly intersectional approach in order to avoid the trap of racial essentializing. In this research project, through the lens of race and gender theories, I constructed a theoretical framework through which I explored youth's racial identities without eliding a discussion of other aspects of their identities informed by their gender, class, sexuality, and language.

Theories put forward by Anzaldúa (2012) in *Borderlands* also contributed to a discussion of identity and solidarity within interracial/intercultural relations. In describing a *mestiza consciousness*, Anzaldúa wrote of the struggle of existing within and between multiple languages, cultures, and identities.

Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (p. 100)

While in this passage, Anzaldúa spoke of internal *choques*, I was particularly interested in how this idea spoke to a complex relationship between intra-collisions (struggles to negotiate understandings of self) and inter-collisions (struggles to negotiate relations with others). Intricately intertwined with Anzaldúa's assertion that culture influences our perceptions of self was the parallel notion that in doing so, culture works on our perceptions of our identities in relation to others. Anzaldúa went on to describe that whether we are "Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian" (p. 109) before societal change can occur, we must first reconcile the (mis)perceptions in our minds about these identity categories. As youth, particularly youth of color, come to understand themselves in relation to popular stereotypes, their interactions with other youth of color, and various cultural scripts, I suggest that there might be structural, psychic, political, social, and cultural barriers that inhibit, constrain, or influence interaction. Torre & Ayala (2009) utilized Anzaldúa's concepts of multiplicity, *choques*, and recognizing *nos-otros* to describe the transformative potential of youth PAR to empower youth to navigate these barriers. Anzaldúa originally conceptualized *nos-otros* as the intermingling of the identities and subjectivities of the colonizer and the colonized; however, Torre & Fine broadened the concept to describe contact zones in PAR or the "messy social space where differently situated people meet, clash, and grapple with each other across their varying relationships to power" (Torre & Fine, 2008, p. 25). Particularly of interest to this dissertation project, Torre & Ayala used the concept of *nos-otros* to describe a PAR

practice that is liberatory, allows space for shifting, emergent identities, and focuses on interrelatedness between participants.

In building on the work of Collins, White, Lorde, Alarcón, Anzaldúa, and others, I explored whether identity politics and the presence of an essentialized Blackness or Latino-ness might hinder positive interracial/intercultural relations. In doing so, I theorized about the often presumed homogeneity of experience of the groups that fall under the *people of color* umbrella. If coalition and alliance are grounded solely in single-racial identity-based understandings of self and others, then efforts at coalition risk falling apart because of the marginalization of other identities; differing historical struggles around issues of race, class, gender, language, and sexuality; or the tendency to create a hierarchy or ranking of oppression. Therefore, in this project I sought to describe how coalitions and alliances are formed within difference by building upon gender identity theories.

**Troubling and disrupting identities.** In her groundbreaking work on gender, Butler (1990/1999/2004) reflected on the nature of the subject in a way that recognizes the complexity, multifaceted, and paradoxical relationship between identity, discourse, and gender performance. In speaking of the performative, produced, theoretical repetition of gender, she likened identity categories to “regulatory regimes” which limit and exclude the current and future development of the subject. Butler theorized about gender performances, and although I acknowledge that race perhaps operates differently, I viewed parallels between Butler’s ideas of performativity and the performances of racialized identities. These potential parallels call for further consideration of the ways

that gender performances intersect with the performance of race and class identities. I suggest that while racial identity may be salient for many youth for a variety of historical, social, and material reasons, when given the space and opportunity to think critically about social justice, self, and other, youth complicate ideas of self and other by working collaboratively on issues important to all participants in the group.

The work of queer people of color, influenced by critical, poststructuralism and postmodernism theories, was relevant to a discussion of interracial/intercultural relations in disrupting fixed ideas of identity categories and illuminating ways that race and class identities become essentialized. Perhaps most importantly, queer of color theorists challenged queer theorist's tendency to elide issues of race. In doing so, queer of color theorists, such as Muñoz (1999) attempted to bridge discussions of intersectionality with a poststructural theory that troubled essentialized identity categories. Muñoz explained that as a result of "biases and turf-war thinking...an identity construct such as 'queer of color' [is] difficult to inhabit" (p. 8). Yet, Muñoz (1999) and others (Alarcón, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991) argued that the process of negotiating identity is challenging for minority subjects who must attempt to negotiate static identities with socially prescribed roles. In other words, they must negotiate essentialized versions of self in conjunction with socially acceptable scripts of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Muñoz describes this process of negotiating identity as,

labor (and it is often, if not always, *work*) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered

identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt. (p. 6)

How might youth navigate these “jolts” in the social order as they form collaborative groups for social justice-oriented goals? Muñoz described “normativizing protocols” as barriers to accessing identity (Muñoz, 1999, p. 8). In this project, I argued that youth, particularly youth of color, often operated in intensely segregated spaces in which societal norms reduce them to their race, class, or gender without consideration of intersecting components of their identities. Throughout the project, I theorize about how this tendency to normativize and essentialize, particularly racial identities, might influence intercultural/interracial relations.

To further expand upon the ways in which both single-identity-based approaches and what I have termed *identity-disruptive* poststructural approaches could be blended to show the complexity and fluidity of identity for people of color, I offer examples from the body of work called Black queer studies. E. Johnson and Henderson (2005) argued that Black male leadership in Black studies departments “cordoned off all identity categories not based on race” (p. 18). In essentializing what it meant to be Black in order to fight racial hegemony, E. Johnson and Henderson asserted that “essentialist identity politics often reforc[ed] hegemonic power structures other than dismantling them” (p. 5). While E. Johnson and Henderson lauded queer theorists for their contributions to disrupting fixed identity discourses and troubling gender binaries, they attempted to *quare* queer studies by returning to a discussion of race for social and political purposes.

The term *quare* reflects the Southern pronunciation of *queer* used by E. Johnson's grandmother. They argued, "Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms cannot afford to theorize their lives based on 'single-variable' politics" (p. 5). Some have defined queer as nonnormative or outside of the margins, and although initially used to theorize sexuality, the term *queer* has broader uses that include those who are marginalized by nondominant race, class, gender, language, or sexuality. Similar to Muñoz's acknowledgement of the seeming paradox of *queer* and *color*, E. Johnson and Henderson argued that to add the marker *Black* to the term *queer* seems contradictory. However, they justified their use of both terms in order to embrace the "double cross of arming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of 'queer' while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker 'Black'" (p. 7). While maintaining queer theorists' desire to question the essence of identity categories, queer theorists of color repoliticize queer theoretical debates by reinserting discussions of pervasive issues of racism, discrimination, and oppression of people of color. Drawing on queer of color theories within a discussion of interracial/intercultural relations among youth enabled me to similarly explore, trouble, and describe youth identity in ways that simultaneously place in conversation the politics of coalition/solidarity within a discussion of how youth negotiate intersectional identities.

**Identity-in-difference.** In exploring interracial/intercultural relations among youth, I further build upon the concept of how *identities-in-difference* develop within social-justice focused, collaborative experiences to build solidarity among youth. Muñoz



(1999/2000) used the term “identities-in-difference” to conceptualize the ways that “radical women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) ‘identity politics’ and ‘postmodernism’” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 7). Similarly, I also aligned my understanding of *identity-in-difference* with Lorde’s (1984) idea of “using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives” (pp. 115-116). In articulating this point, she maintained that our difficulty in dealing with difference is a byproduct of a capitalist economy that constructs hierarchy and binaries to divide, deeming some of us marginalized, deviant, or lacking. Lorde (1984) refused to believe that difference is inherently a problem and instead states that,

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation. (p. 115)

If as Lorde argued, we possess limited social models for interacting as equals across differences because of a patriarchal, oppressive, and hierarchical society, then there is strong rationale for exploring ways that youth interacting through their differences might provide a *springboard* for change. While many diversity feminisms operate within a poststructural and often postmodern tradition of troubling identity categories, they also employ concepts of intersectionality that suggest the importance of a fluid form of identity politics or *strategic essentialism* (Spivak & Harasym, 1990) to further political solidarity and coalition building. In investigating interracial/intercultural relations among youth, I explored concepts of identity politics, strategic essentialism, and the shifting of

perceptions of identity through collaborative work. In keeping with these themes, I recruited both male and female participants for the study. While I am not negating the value of large bodies of research that use gender theories to study females, and increasingly more that study masculinity with all male participants, I intentionally foregrounded the idea of multiplicity and fluidity in identity categories, which supported an argument for a mixed-gender group.

If encouraged to view identity in new and radical ways and given the space and encouragement to work collaboratively across lines of difference, youth could further develop their understandings of self and others. Although I recruited participants in my study because they self-identified as Black, Latino/a, or mixed race, I used diversity feminisms as lenses through which I constructed and carried out the study in ways that acknowledged the fluidity and intersectionality of participants who also differed in class, gender, language, citizenship status, sexuality, and other identity categories. Though there are strong arguments for identity-based understandings of self that recognize historical and political struggles specific to particular groups, I suggest that more fluid understandings of self could also prove beneficial for coalition building.

In summary, in the dissertation, *Crossing Borders and Forging Bonds: Exploring Intercultural/Interracial Relationships among Youth of Color*, I examine interaction among students of color (Black and Latino/a) as they engage in a participatory action research (PAR) in an urban high school. As youth engage in critically-oriented activities and collaborative interaction, I explore how the participatory research process influences and shapes youths' relationships, particularly as they navigate racial/cultural/class/gender

differences. Theories of race, gender, and identity served as the foundation for the study of interracial/intercultural relations among youth engaged in a collaborative project. In Chapter 2, I contextualize this discussion within a review of existing literature on racial contact, intercultural relations, and participatory action research. In Chapter 3, I describe how an ethnographic investigation represented a useful methodology in studying these issues and outline details for how I engaged with youth in a collaborative project. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I analyze the results of the research and draw conclusions.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In exploring the ways in which youth navigate racial differences, particularly in educational spaces, I describe literature about contact between races, including a brief overview of research on contact theory, propinquity, and homophily; then, more specifically, I consider the ways that current scholarship has described intercultural relations among people of color. Also, because participants in my study engaged in collaborative projects using a youth participatory action research (YPAR) model, I review YPAR literature to describe the degree to which it has been used to investigate both interracial/intercultural contact and issues that may facilitate or obstruct contact, such as deficit thinking or empowerment.

#### **Contact, Propinquity, and Homophily**

In analyzing the complexities of intercultural relationships, it is useful to explore the literature surrounding theories of contact between people of different races and ethnicities. Overall, studies of interracial contact have been predominately quantitative, large-scale, and drawn from social science datasets that survey adults through phone surveys or youth through school-wide surveys. Most involve fairly complex statistical analyses to generate broad theories about the nature of racial contact. To my knowledge, none of the major studies of racial contact that draw from contact theory utilized ethnographic qualitative methodologies. In contact literature, scholars explore

propinquity (closeness or nearness of groups), homophily (birds of a feather flock together), cultural theory (negative, collective impressions of other groups passed down through generations) and group threat (the idea that large groups of minorities present a threat) (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). Simply stated, homophily is the notion that “similarity breeds connection” (McPherson, Smith-Loven, & Cook, 2001, p. 415). Even though a network of individuals could be similar along lines of age, race, class, education, and many other characteristics, social science research on homophily has primarily focused on the prevalence of racial homophily, though some research has begun to consider factors that may affect racial homophily other than the preference for same race networks (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010). In response to the assumption that individuals have a tendency to group themselves with racially similar groups, proponents of contact theory assert that propinquity or “close and sustained contact, with members of other cultural groups provides direct information about the values, lifestyles, and experiences of members of those groups” which in turn provides “a more favorable perception of the group(s) in general, countering or displacing unflattering images or other inaccurate perceptions” (Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011, p. 938-939).

Historically theorists applied the contact principle to a discussion of Black/White relationships to make the case that majority group contact with minorities would reduce negative stereotypes and prejudice (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004). In keeping with this theme, Dixon and Rosenbaum (2004) tested contact, group threat, and cultural theories to explore which theory best explained anti-Black and anti-Latina/o stereotypes among

Whites. After conducting a multi-level analysis of a social science database that surveyed over 800 participants, they concluded that Whites who knew blacks and Hispanics from school, community, and work were less likely to express anti-Hispanic or anti-Black stereotypes and that “irrespective of the influence of culture and racial/ethnic composition, contact can and does help to disconfirm stereotypes” (p. 277). However, while expressing fewer negative stereotypes represents a step of progress, more effective discussions of intercultural relationships requires considering the influence of larger societal issues like systemic racism and discrimination on meaningful communication. Assuming that “stereotypes can be overcome with relatively superficial contact under the right conditions,” (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004, p. 257) perhaps oversimplifies the deeply entrenched nature of prejudice. Others asserted that the type and quality of contact matters.

Allport (1954/1979), who conducted path breaking research in contact theory argued the following:

Effects of contact on prejudice vary depending on the quality and quantity of contact, whether contact is voluntary, the extent to which the contact is between majority and minority members of “equal status,” whether contact occurs in a competitive or collaborative environment, and the area—or the “interactive setting”—in which contact occurs. (as cited in Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004, p. 260)

In keeping with this theme of exploring the complexities of contact (Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011) discussed factors that contribute to friendships and contact by exploring the attitudes of Anglo and African-American respondents towards Latina/os in the United

States. Researchers used the NORC General Social Survey (GSS) dataset which contained a section that asked respondents specific questions about ethnicity and diversity. Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression and logistic regression to analyze the dataset, Ellison, Shin, and Leal (2011) found that propinquity (nearness) to Latina/os, increases in the Latina/o population, and some Spanish language proficiency encouraged friendships with Latina/os; however, they could not establish a firm link between respondents who attended high school with Latina/os and increases in friendships with Latina/os. Additionally, although propinquity may positively affect the establishments of friendships in some cases, closeness did not necessarily imply a change in attitudes nor encourage tolerance. Ellison, Shin, and Leal (2011) could only establish a firm, consistent link between being close friendships with Latina/o(s) and changes in “attitudinal outcomes, including stereotyping, respect for the contributions of Latina/os, social and cultural distance, and views of immigration policy” (p. 951-952). Researchers concluded that although Anglo and African-American respondents shared the same spaces in schools and neighborhoods with Latina/os, these experiences did not constitute the type of contact that necessarily built friendships or changed stereotypes and misperceptions.

Although there are a number of empirical studies of race/ethnic contact, most have quantitatively measured contact. Thus, the voices of participants have been less prevalent in contact literature and the “why” and “how” of interaction is not well understood. Many studies of youth interracial/intercultural contact (Joyner & Kao, 2000; Quillian & Campbell, 2003; Zeng & Xie, 2008) referenced data collected from the

National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey administered in 144 schools across the nation. Although researchers have thoughtfully considered the implications of increasingly multicultural youth populations on school climate and affective domains of education, actual data collection from the survey occurred from 1994-1995, making it a relatively dated impression of youth' interracial/interethnic friendship choices. The demographics in several states have shifted over the past 20 years. For example, dramatic shifts in population occurred in southern states during the late 1990s (McClain et al., 2006) due to increased immigration. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health may not represent an accurate depiction of the recent trends of interaction that have occurred in the Southeast. Through data collected in this dissertation project, I hope to further theories of interethnic/intercultural contact among youth of color.

### **Intercultural Relations among People of Color**

Interaction between cultural groups has been described by psychologists, by scholars who study prejudice and discrimination, and by political science scholars and sociologists, who have explored structural influences and societal implications of interaction between people of color (Gay, 2004, 2006; McClain et al., 2006). Although I am interested in the particulars of youth's individual perspectives and interaction, a critical interpretation of the issue necessitated a survey of macro-level trends and tendencies described in the literature. For example, literature on intercultural relations between Blacks and Latinos/as has often been talked about from the perspective of a *zero-sum* argument, or the idea that gains for one group lead to loss for another group.



Gay (2004) linked Blacks' economic situation to their attitudes towards Latinas/os. She argued that Blacks living in neighborhoods characterized by poverty and limited opportunity "tend to be deeply pessimistic about the extent to which race and racism limit their individual life chances" which may lead to a "hardening of attitudes toward Latinas/os, a group whose growing national prominence makes it a salient target" (Gay, 2004, as cited in Gay, 2006, p. 984). Gay's argument is consistent with a zero-sum perspective on limited resources for both groups; that is, increases in numbers of Latinos/as could be perceived as a threat to the economic security of Black populations.

In a later study, Gay (2006) built on her prior research by testing the hypothesis that Blacks living in areas where Latino/as are more economically prosperous are more likely to hold negative impressions of Latino/as than Blacks living in areas where the Black and Latino/a populations are economically similar. She tested this hypothesis by analyzing a dataset of 1,103 adults living in Los Angeles who self-identify as Black. Gay (2006) portrayed a more nuanced argument than her earlier study (Gay, 2004) in suggesting that the differences in attitudes expressed towards Latinas/os was not so much contingent upon overall neighborhood disparities, but more reflective of disparities between different groups. More specifically, her data suggested that "African Americans who reside in integrated neighborhoods where Latinas/os are materially better off than blacks harbor more negative stereotypes about the group" and that increases in the Latina/o population in those neighborhoods magnified Blacks "sensitivity to the economic disparities between the groups" (p. 990). From her analysis of data, she concluded the following:

Idealized notions of “natural” intergroup comity and mutual support collapse when confronted by a finite number of public and (low-skilled) private sector jobs; by the lack of educational resources to meet the needs of Black children and Spanish-speaking Latina/o children; by a shortage of adequate and affordable housing; and by the desire among both groups for descriptive political representation on neighborhood councils, on school boards, and in municipal government. (Gay, 2006, p. 983)

However, where Gay (2006) viewed limited resources as a simple barrier between positive group contact, Ellison, Shin, and Leal (2011) asserted that “simply being friends with Latina/o(s) does not allay African-American concerns about the possible employment consequences of immigration, possibly due to sensitivity to competition for low-skill and service-sector jobs,” (p. 950) suggesting that friendships between Blacks and Latinas/os do occur but that economic competition may still linger in the background.

In a parallel study, Meir, McClain, Polinard, and Wrinkle (2004) investigated relations between Blacks and Latinos/as in multiracial school districts and found evidence of both conflict and cooperation. Researchers analyzed multi-year data (1997-1999) collected from over 194 school districts in Texas. They contended that Texas possessed some of the most multiracial school districts in the nation with access to more complete data sets than districts in California and New York. Using a two stage least squares analysis technique, researchers concluded that there are often situations in which the *zero-sum* argument is a reality. In hiring teachers and administrators, hiring a person of one particular ethnicity resulted in feelings of loss from other groups who did not feel as adequately represented by leaders from their community in the schools. Meir, McClain, Polinard, & Wrinkle (2004) concluded that further study on minority coalitions

is required in order to better describe the conditions and political issues under which groups of color perceive that collaboration will result in a *positive-sum* experience for both groups.

Little is known about specific interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color, yet researchers have explored friendship choices among youth. In one study in particular that is often cited in intercultural relations literature, Quillian and Campbell (2003) analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the survey administered in 144 schools that I mentioned previously, in studying multiracial friendship choices among youth. Interestingly, they found that although most youth preferred friends from their own race, interracial and interethnic friendships increased as the numbers of Latina/o and Asian youth increased in the school population. Although they found friendships between certain youth of color often developed more easily than Black/White friendships, friendships still tended to divide along racial lines. Quillian & Campbell concluded that there existed “high levels of segregation of blacks, including Black Hispanics, from all other racial groups” and that “White Hispanic and Black Hispanic students are joining, respectively, White and Black peer groups” (p. 560). Although they acknowledged these findings to be alarming, researchers did not theorize implications or reasons for these findings. Also, researchers omitted the all-important contextual details of the high school setting and the voices of participants.

Examples of qualitative, community-based descriptions of interracial/intercultural interaction are particularly useful in topic and design to the dissertation research that I will conduct. In a description of Blacks and Latinas/os involved in a community

organization called the Community for the Children of Lakeview (CCL), Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, and Webster (2011) attempted to shine a light on the tensions between transitioning to a “collective other” mentality versus recognizing the heterogeneity in the struggle of Blacks and Latinas/os (p. 108). They described Lakeview as a community with a rapidly growing Puerto Rican population. While Black and Latina/o citizens of Lakeview attempted to portray a “unified front” (p. 110) in an effort to effect change in their community, Latina/o participants felt marginalized and felt that Blacks in power minimized their unique struggles around language and immigration. In Lakeview, Black/Latina/o relations reflected a difference in the power differential of the group and “distinctions in racial consciousness and experiences within the Black-white racial landscape of the United States” (Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011, p. 104). Rather than being recognized and celebrated for their own distinctive contributions to the organization, Spanish-speaking participants felt their language was seen as a “liability” (p. 108) and that Blacks dismissed “Latina/o-specific experiences of oppression” (p. 114), resulting in a situation in which Latina/o participants felt they had to defend against both societal White privilege as well as Black privilege within the organization. I concur with Quiñones et al. (2011) in their assessment of relations between Blacks and Latinas/os as an “under-theorized subject of study,” and their sense that despite the fact that “collaboration may be in both groups’ mutual interest,” their “negative interethnic perception” requires additional study (Moll and Ruiz, 2005, as cited by Quiñones et al., 2011, p. 105). In this dissertation, I built upon Quiñones et al.’s

research through an in-depth study of youth engaged in collective work in hopes of finding ways to build bridges of understanding among youth of color.

Consistent with an intersectional approach to the study of intercultural relations, it is important to acknowledge the diversity within particular ethnic communities. This diversity prompts a discussion of whether or not members of youth of color groups feel it is beneficial or necessary to ally together as a “collective other.” Sanchez (2008) explored this issue in discussing the influence of Latina/o group consciousness on interactions with Blacks through a multivariate analysis of data from the 1999 Washington Post/Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of 2,417 Latinos. Researchers contacted participants by telephone in English and/or Spanish and asked a series of questions about background, demographics, education, and feelings about, perceptions of, and interaction with African-Americans. In addition to contributing to research describing some Latinas/os’ negative views of African Americans (McClain, 2006; Sanchez, 2008), Sanchez went a step further in his analysis and described several factors that influenced how likely Latinas/os were to feel commonality with Blacks and a sense of “linked fate” (p. 431). Sanchez (2008) clustered the factors into the following five categories:

- 1) group consciousness (Latina/o commonality, perceived discrimination, collective action), (2) socioeconomic status/demographic factors (income, education, gender, age, urban), (3) attitudes and experiences, (4) social-political integration (nativity, length of time in the United States, English proficiency), and (5) national origin (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Central/South American). (p. 433)

Sanchez (2008) dealt specifically with each of these categories in a discussion of the complexity of factors that seem to influence Latinas/os' perceptions of Blacks. In summary, he found a link between the following variables and a more positive affinity toward Blacks: Democratic political affiliation; born in the United States; younger with lower levels of education; similar living conditions with Blacks; and Dominican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban national origin. Latinas/os who were foreign-born, of Mexican national origin, and lived in urban areas displayed the most negative attitudes toward Blacks. Sanchez (2008) went on to suggest that "as the values of Latina/o internal commonality and perceived discrimination increase, so does the likelihood that Latinas/os will express greater perceptions of commonality with blacks" (p. 435). Sanchez (2008) concluded that a greater panethnic and group consciousness would increase Latinas/os' positive attitudes toward Blacks, which would enhance the likelihood of forming alliances for political and civic purposes.

### **Youth as Researchers**

Research with/by/for youth has become increasingly common as a theory, framework, and method to address complex issues (Lykes & Coquillon, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006). One of the most prominent forms has been described as PAR<sup>4</sup> with youth, also called youth PAR, youth participatory action research (YPAR) or youth-led PAR. McIntyre (2000) outlines three major components of participatory action research (PAR): "(1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> In this essay, I use the terms PAR and YPAR interchangeably with the understanding that in both I am referring to participatory action research that engages youth as coresearchers.

to better understand that problem, and (3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem” (p. 128). Although YPAR is not a panacea for the complex issues that youth confront, it holds potential for empowerment and transformation (Stovall, 2006) as youth researchers raise their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987) of issues confronting their schools and communities, and work for change in ways that are critical and collaborative. YPAR’s focus on engaging youth to “investigate their own realities” (Rahman, 2008, p. 49) in ways that are nonhierarchical, enlightening, and empowering (Berg, 2004), while conducting critical analysis of the specific contexts of their schools and communities (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987) for the purpose of social justice, makes it an appropriate vehicle through which to work on building stronger relationships and alliances.

PAR scholars enact a research approach in which youth participants are positioned as co-researchers, research topics are either student-generated or heavily influenced by youth perspectives, and the reporting of research takes the form of articles, interactive websites, policy documents, oral presentations, conference presentations, or formal reports to be presented to a particular audience. In typical PAR studies, researchers describe the product (report, website, etc.) produced by youth, and data involving the level of consciousness raising and empowerment experienced by participants, through rich, anecdotal and narrative formats that detail how youth engaged in the PAR process. Before reviewing the literature on PAR, I briefly trace the theoretical genealogy of YPAR within critically-oriented research traditions in order to

highlight the unique contribution that YPAR has made within youth, ethnic, and cultural studies. Then, I highlight examples of YPAR scholarship in education and youth engagement and explore the potential of YPAR in furthering the conversation on youth interracial/interethnic relations.

### **Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Action Research**

In building an argument for the use of YPAR to engage youth in investigating interracial/interethnic relations, it is necessary to explore the theoretical paradigms on which YPAR studies have been based. The ideology behind YPAR reflects tenets of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998/2009; Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005), indigenous theory (Grande, 2004; Tuck, 2012), feminist/Borderland theories (Anzaldúa, 2012; Lorde 1984; Mohanty, 1991), and critical pedagogical traditions (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2010) in challenging dominant narratives and engaging in praxis. Although YPAR scholars build on these theoretical traditions, the unique action-focus of PAR distinguishes it from other critical scholarship. Grounded in the knowledge of participants and their collective experiences in research (Torre & Fine, 2006), PAR is based on more than “abstract theoretical positioning” (Quijada, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011, p. 590). Through PAR, participants as coresearchers negotiate enhanced understandings of self and other, reject “dualistic and hierarchical thinking” and put forth a “liberatory PAR” in which “PAR collectives create new spaces whereby co-researchers enjoy new parts of themselves, and new forms of relationships with each other” (Torre & Ayala, 2009, p. 388-389). Also, PAR foregrounds the idea that “those who have experienced historic oppression—hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences and should



help shape the questions, frame the interpretations, and style the research products that ultimately affect them most intimately” (Torre & Fine, 2006, p. 458). PAR theory eschews deficit approaches to viewing the lives and perspectives of youth—instead viewing the present and future potential of youth to theorize about their communities and effect change in their surroundings.

### **PAR Studies in Education**

Participatory action research (PAR) has been used in various national, international, school, and community contexts for empowerment (Goessling & Doyle, 2009), literacy (Morrell, 2006), to increase youth activism (Fine, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2008; Tuck, 2008a; Tuck et al., 2008b), as a pedagogical tool (Morrell, 2008), and to explore issues of privilege and violence (Stoudt, 2009; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). PAR has been implemented in numerous disciplines—a search of “participatory action research” yields over 8,000 sources on the topic. Below, I highlight YPAR projects that show the depth and breadth of how YPAR can be conceptualized and actualized.

### **YPAR that Confronts Deficit Ideology**

While many descriptions of YPAR studies focus on the development, processes, and outcome of the research project, some focus specifically on countering deficit perceptions of students. Deficit ideology glosses over a discussion of systemic inequalities and suggests that “intellectual, moral, and spiritual deficiencies in certain groups of people” (Gorski, 2008, p. 5) lead to lack of success in education. These studies are particularly informative because of the potential role that deficit ideology could play in youth’s perceptions of one another. Ozer and Wright (2012) conducted a study of

PAR projects created in two urban high schools that initiated PAR projects in an elective course. Researchers described ways that teachers' impressions of students changed as students engaged in school-wide YPAR projects. Through the qualitatively designed study of the two high schools that implemented YPAR as an elective course, Ozer and Wright sought to determine whether YPAR enhanced student-teacher relationships and student voice. "Woodson," the smaller of the two high schools, struggled with test scores in the lowest quartile in the district and high percentages of students in poverty. As a YPAR project, students researched teaching best practices through trainings and interviews, conducted professional development for their school faculty to present their findings, and then collaborated with teachers and consultants to create a "Best Practices Club" in which researchers trained students to observe teachers and give positive feedback about effective teaching strategies.

The researchers asserted that the YPAR process changed the ways that teachers "perceived student competencies and potential for contributing" (p. 277), and allowed students from marginalized communities to "be heard despite disadvantage and racism" (p. 278). While Ozer and Wright did not directly address youth's potentially deficit beliefs about each other, their study illustrated the potential of youth engaged in PAR projects to begin to create counternarratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002) and to envision their potential in transformative ways. They identified shifts in student-teacher interaction as students who were previously marginalized in their school began to view themselves as professionals and experts on topics they researched. Pervasive deficit thinking based on dominant, racist narratives could serve as a barrier to positive

interracial/interethnic relations among youth of color (Gay, 2004, 2006; McClain et al., 2006). YPAR holds potential for engaging youth in developing strategies to challenge racially and culturally deficit representations of themselves and forge new relationships with their peers and teachers.

### **YPAR that Focuses on Empowerment**

Much of PAR scholarship focuses on the idea of youth becoming empowered to work collectively to address social justice issues. This notion of empowerment may be particularly important in cultivating more positive interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color. The *Youth Researchers for a New Education System* (YRNES) school project is a good example of a PAR project that focused on empowerment by encouraging youth to engage in critical dialogue about their social context. The YRNES project (Tuck, 2008a; Tuck et al., 2008b) was approached from a critical, activist-oriented lens in which a multiethnic group of former and current NYC student researchers utilized a mixed methods design to highlight the perspectives of New York City youth who had been *pushed out* of schools.

In articulating their positionality, the researchers described themselves as “a diverse group of youth from all over New York City (NYC) who came together for a common goal: to be instruments of change in the NYC public school system” (p. 1). More specifically, two research goals guided their research: 1) “What are NYC students’ perspectives on what is and isn’t provided in their schools” and 2) “What are NYC students’ perspectives on school organization and leadership” (p. 2). While researchers did not explicitly outline their theoretical framework, they positioned their work within a

larger struggle to view education as a human right. Confronted with inequitable schooling and high drop-out rates, youth researchers approached the research project with the goal of illuminating the voices and perspectives of youth most affected by school policies.

The researchers used a mixed methods approach involving online and paper-based surveys, two focus groups, and an activity where they asked focus group participants to complete a visual map called a problem tree which researchers defined as “an approach to mapping (creating a visual representation) a specific problem determined by a group” (p. 4). The quantitative phase of the study consisted of surveying a city-wide sample of 546 fourteen to twenty year old current and former NYC public school students. During the separate qualitative phase, researchers recruited 18 participants from prominent NYC youth organizations to take part in two focus groups. During the focus groups, YRNES researchers asked participants to visually map their educational experiences. Researchers compiled the results of all participant and YPAR researchers’ maps into one problem tree that they presented as part of the results section of the article. Identifying themselves as those who had been discounted and pushed aside by NYC schools, researchers viewed research and activism as ways to speak back to dominant misperceptions of NYC students and committed to remaining “conscious of how society’s power structures play out in our interactions, so that we can challenge them and thus allow each other more room to grow” (Tuck et al., 2008b, p. 80-81). Although the actual YRNES report described the results of their study, in a different publication (Tuck, 2008a) Tuck and youth participants collectively articulated the process by which they formed a group

devoted to YPAR. They discussed how they negotiated power differences within the group.

We are not an academic or government space...We fill different roles based on our interests and talents, where in other research spaces, power is usually only held by those with the most research experience. Finally, we engage in our own process of decision making, whereas other participatory spaces may rely on a one-person, one-vote decision making model that will always muffle the voices of those in numeric minority. (Tuck, 2008a, p. 50)

Researchers hinted at their overall approach to navigating tension and conflict as they sought to empower one another through the research process. Yet since the focus of the research was on collective empowerment to speak back to deficit perspectives, they didn't provide any description about the specific ways in which coresearchers navigated their differences.

### **Identity-Related YPAR**

Researchers have conducted PAR projects with youth to understand identity and subjectivity. Sirin and Fine (2008) explored the ways in which Muslim-American youth negotiate their identities in a *post-9/11* and *post-War on Terror* society through a YPAR-type project. The authors articulated a theoretical framework for understanding youth's "hyphenated selves" (Sirin & Fine, 2007, p. 16) or the ways in which youth subjectivities are created and changed within controversial national, political, cultural, and ethnic spaces. The study consisted of 204 male and female participants, divided into two cohorts (12-18 and 18-25), who researchers contacted through mosques, community organizations, and schools using a snowball sampling method. Participants completed a

basic survey intended to capture “frequency of perceived discrimination,” “discrimination-related stress,” “Muslim identity,” “mainstream U.S. identity,” “social and cultural preferences,” and “coping strategies” (p. 16-17). At the suggestion of the youth advisory board, the researchers added several opened ended questions to the survey. Of the 204 participants, 137 completed identity maps or visual depictions intended to “capture how young people creatively present their identities through drawings” (p. 17). Then, a random sample of each age cohort was chosen to participate in two focus groups.

In theorizing about the ways in which Muslim-American youth understood their shifting identities, researchers sought to “(i) document the collective impact of surveillance and scrutiny on youth identified as Muslim and/or Arab,” “(ii) capture the variation, complexity, multiplicity, and vibrancy of youth Muslims,” and “(iii) introduce ‘Muslim-American’ youth, who have been neglected in adolescence studies, into the core of youth studies without exoticizing them” (Sirin & Fine, 2007; p. 17). The authors stated that in addition to theorizing about hybrid identities, they also hoped to “model and advance [their] disciplinary thinking about how (not if) to work across the methodological hyphen” (Sirin & Fine, 2008, p. 20). In conducting the study, researchers utilized a combination of surveys, open-ended questions, identity maps, focus groups, and personal interviews. In the beginning stages of the study, researchers convened an advisory group of diverse Muslim teenagers, age 12-18, to provide input on ways to construct the project that would answer particular research questions. Sirin and Fine (2008) described that the “strongly opinionated advisory group of young people” worked

to “help [them] devise methods to best capture and tell another story about Muslim American youth” (p. 198). While Muslim American youth are not the specific focus of my research, this research provides a model of a collaborative project that focuses on identity-related issues, privileges youth perspectives, and offers counterstories of the lives of traditionally marginalized youth. Also, Fine and Sirin’s emphasis on using PAR as a vehicle to describe how youth understand and navigate their understanding of self in relation to others parallels the research questions in this dissertation research.

### **YPAR Studies that Promote Intercultural Relationships**

I am particularly drawn to the theoretical and methodological approach to YPAR taken in research by Fine (2008), Torre (2009), Quijada (2009), and Cahill (2007). These scholars and others (Quijada, Cahill, & Bradley, 2011, 2013; Morrell, 2006; Tuck, 2012) each contribute differently to a discussion of PAR; they all push beyond a surface level, one-dimensional approach to youth participation and focus on both personal and collective inquiry of an issue combined with social-justice oriented action to address it. While studies that fall under the PAR umbrella are broad and varied, in this section of the literature review, I specifically discuss PAR research that uniquely contributes to the study of/by/with youth by bridging theory and practice, privileging indigenous/grassroots knowledge, and engaging an intersectional and multiperspectival exploration of identity. While there are few YPAR studies that directly address intercultural relations (Quijada, 2009), I describe three PAR studies that are similar to the one I plan to conduct. In these studies, through the process of engaging in critical investigations of their communities and schools, youth researchers simultaneously explored their own racial and cultural

positionality within the research space in order to promote more critical understandings of systems of power, oppression, and stereotype.

Quijada (2009) conducted ethnographic research with socioeconomically diverse, Black, Latina/o and mixed race youth who worked in the context of a community nonprofit organization. Data collection consisted of observations of youth workshops, focus groups with youth organizers as they prepared and debriefed workshops, and individual semi-structured interviews with youth organizers. In exploring how four youth in particular dealt with conflicts that arose as they administered diversity workshops for other youth, Quijada (2009) asked how PAR might enable a discussion of ways in which youth navigate intercultural difference. Using a grounded theory analytical approach, he described ways in which the youth came to understand alliances, difference, and “unity in differences” (p. 452). He argued that “understanding difference through our individual positions and privileges requires collective participation” (p. 451). Citing critical theorists and feminist theorists, he argued for a “politics of solidarity,” “moving beyond a hierarchy of struggles,” and “‘a decentered unity’ that merges conflict with coalition” (p. 451). However, we know little about how youth engaged in the process of navigating conflict and coalition, how YPAR functioned to create theoretical, action-oriented space that fostered this process, what type of educative, consciousness-raising activities occurred to prepare youth to facilitate workshops, and how the interplay of conflict and coalition played out in the beginning stages of the youth coalition.

In the YPAR project, *Echoes of Brown* (Torre & Fine, 2008; Torre, 2009), Torre and Fine created a coalition of diverse youth to investigate the legacy of the historic



*Brown v Board of Education* decision on contemporary urban schools. During the 3-year YPAR project, youth studied segregation, desegregation, oral history, urban school tracking, and achievement scores, and presented findings in various formats to community members, school boards, educators, and policy makers across the nation. While creating a performance-based (poetry and multi-media) research report describing their findings about how the legacy of Brown still affects contemporary schools, youth explored social injustice, crossed cultural boundaries and reflected upon privilege and oppression in their personal lives. They defined their diverse coalition of youth in line with Pratt's (1991) conceptualization of a contact zone or a "messy social space where differently situated people meet, clash, and grapple with each other across their varying relationships to power" (Torre & Fine, 2008, p. 24). Researchers noted that by purposefully grouping youth who were different in race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status, and comfort/discomfort with their bodies, they intentionally created a research space with unique capacity to generate innovative thoughts and ideas about the research topic. Rather than overly focusing on consensus, Torre and Fine foregrounded *difference* in the research setting. However, while they described that there was an inherent critique of power within critically oriented YPAR work and they acknowledged the importance of deconstructing privilege in the contact zone, I am left with questions about the specific processes by which youth navigated race and gender differences, particularly those that arose between youth of color in the group.

While Torre and Fine created a race and gender diverse YPAR group, Cahill (2007) researched a multiethnic (Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, Chinese)

YPAR group of women ages 16-22 who explored the workings of stereotypes, poor resources, and failing institutions on the identities of women of color in their neighborhood (Cahill, 2007; Cahill, Rios-Moore and Threatts, 2008). Through an investigation of their own community through mental mapping, field notes, photography, and observations of community settings, the women engaged one another in a process of critical consciousness raising as they came to perceive themselves and their communities in different ways. They described the three major phases of their YPAR process as researching their community, personal transformation, and using their newfound knowledge as a catalyst for change. As a culminating project, researchers disseminated findings about confronting and resisting racial and cultural stereotypes in the form of youth-friendly reports and presentations in local schools. In describing the process by which they engaged in the YPAR project, they state,

Whereas at the beginning of our research process what was most remarkable to all of us were our differences, through the process of doing the research project we identified a collective identification as “young urban women of color”—a shared standpoint based on an identification of intersections of race, gender, and place. (Cahill, Rios-More, & Threatts, 2008, p. 112)

In a separate publication, lead researcher Cahill (2007) explored the PAR project conducted with the group of women through the lens of poststructural feminist theories and argued that PAR works well for both social change and personal change. Though much of PAR reflects critical theoretical ideology, Cahill distinguished identity and subjectivity in arguing for a feminist poststructuralist understanding of how “individual and collective subjects negotiate multiple and contradictory discourses” in PAR work

(Cahill, 2007, p. 270). Rather than only unearthing subjugated knowledge, seeking to give voice, or empower PAR participants, Cahill argued that through PAR, participants “actually create new forms of knowledge and ways of knowing” as they develop “new subjectivities” (p. 270).

In building upon Cahill’s (2007) understanding of PAR as creating new ways of knowing, I explored the ways in which a racially/ethnically diverse group of PAR participants developed, negotiated, and navigated their new subjectivities about self and other. Particularly in considering issues of race and ethnicity, it may be tempting to fall into an ideology of race as defining, all-encompassing, and static in a way that essentializes youth and elides a fluid and intersectional way of thinking about identity and subjectivity. Likewise, a critical analysis requires an analysis of how power and hegemony come to bear on belief and perception, yet could minimize a discussion of youth agency and resistance. In articulating a framework that is robust enough to explore the macro and micro dynamics of forces affecting youth relations across lines of difference, I envision a critical race, feminist YPAR that represents a critical, yet non-static, fluid way of interrogating identity, subjectivity, and relationships.

### **Contributing to the “Youth as Researchers” Conversation**

Studies like those described above represent significant examples of researchers who fostered solidarity among diverse groups of youth as they worked to highlight the interplay of power, structure, and agency within their schools and communities. They suggest that in order to work towards the ultimate goal of a pedagogy that speaks to issues of intercultural interaction between youth, we must analyze and expose systems of

oppression that operate powerfully and silently in the background of educational and community contexts. Through the inquiry process, researchers created critical communities of youth by linking a greater awareness of social issues to an empowering praxis. In exploring ways that youth of color navigate difference, I build on the work of scholars who have engaged youth research as a means of transformative resistance, community and relationship building, and critical consciousness raising. Although youth research studies reflect theoretical perspectives that range from constructivist to critical, in this review, I sought to highlight a precarious blending of both in building an argument for youth research that provides theoretical and methodological space for youth to negotiate their understandings of their raced, classed, gendered selves and how these ideas influence subsequent interracial/intercultural relations.

In this dissertation research, I explored how the potentially uncomfortable, fluid, contradictory space created by a diverse youth collective created a synergistic space for collaboration, new theory, and new ways of thinking about knowledge and relationships (Torre & Ayala, 2009). Much of youth research literature has focused on praxis in which researchers generate reports, publications, and presentations to speak back to oppression in their schools and communities. Increasingly, youth scholars focus on the individual, personal changes that occur through the research process (Cahill, 2007), but there is much more to be explored about the way in which youth research and collaboration affect interethnic/interracial relationships among youth (Quijada, 2009). In many youth research studies, there is an implicit assumption that youth worked collectively on social justice issues across lines of difference. Researchers assume intercultural bonds are

forged but the process by which it happens is rarely documented, analyzed, or made explicit. Little is known about how youth working within diverse youth coalitions navigate what Delgado and Stefancic (2001) described as the uneasy tension between the *voice of color* thesis and antiessentialism. To briefly explain, the voice of color thesis holds that people of color though they may experience racism and discrimination differently, can speak back to racism in unity as marginalized and disenfranchised people. Yet, CRT theorists described that the voice of color idea must be balanced with the notion of antiessentialism, the recognition of the fluidity of identity, and the reality of within group differences.

Proponents of youth research argue that the line of inquiry should begin from the voices of those most affected by research. Through youth research, youth of color's knowledge about their own lives and communities and their sense of agency to work for social justice can be mobilized for change (Fine, 2009; Torre and Fine, 2006). Youth research such as PAR invites, acknowledges, and celebrates difference as fertile ground for working for social justice. As Torre (2009) described, PAR work allows "multiple fluid identities to move us between what seem[s] like 'natural' identity-based alliances to more politically based alliances" (p. 117). In a dissertation project in which youth engaged in a collaborative, research-oriented project, I investigated how they navigated interracial/intercultural experiences, acknowledged difference, worked collaboratively, and built solidarity. I argue that examining youth of color interaction might teach us about understanding both antiessentialism and solidarity for people of color in an increasingly multicultural world.

In summary, when viewed through the lenses of critical race theory and diversity feminisms, a study of youth of color relations while engaged in a collaborative research project should strive to be antiessentialist, acknowledge multiple identities, and focus on collective experiences without glossing over, minimizing, or suppressing differences that may exist between groups. In order to achieve this, I employed an ethnographic research design through which I sought to embrace difference and multivocality, while simultaneously interrogating “ways micro-tensions in the research reflect macro-level policies and practices” (Torre & Ayala, 2009, p. 390). I describe such a design in my next chapter.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

In this research study, I explored how critical, collaborative, social justice-oriented participatory action research influenced and shaped relationships among youth of color from differing racial/ethnic groups. The results of this research inform efforts to improve school climate in racially diverse settings, provide research-based data about the role of social-justice oriented curriculum in improving interracial/intercultural relations among youth, inform pedagogical approaches that foster collaborative learning, and provide fertile ground for theorizing about intersectional approaches to exploring youth relations. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the qualitative design that I used; brief portraits of the core participants; a description of the research site; the process of creating the Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC); and the procedures for data collection and analysis.

#### **Overview of Qualitative Design**

In this research, I pursued a year-long ethnographic investigation of youth engaged in collaborative projects at a high school located in a large city in the Southeast United States. An ethnographic approach was useful for mapping the particulars of youth interracial/intercultural relations and the overall school climate. Hatch (2002) described that the various types of ethnographies can be understood as ethnographic in their broad

focus on representing cultural knowledge, while the preceding adjective (e.g. critical ethnography or feminist ethnography) describes the paradigm that guides the research theories and design (p. 21). In keeping with this idea, I located this ethnography within both critical and feminist paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hatch, 2002). DeVault (1999) suggested that ethnographers “[take] up a point of view in a marginal location” and “search to explicate the contingencies of ruling that shape local contexts” (p. 48). By immersing myself in data collection and becoming “intensely engaged in the settings” for an entire school year, my goal was to collect rich data and to more fully describe the school context and understand the perspectives of participants (Hatch, 2002, p. 8). While many researchers have used PAR as a primary research methodology, in this study, youth engaged in PAR represented a part of the *intervention* that was explored through ethnography. Inherent in the YPAR model, youth collectively chose their own topics to investigate; however, I did inform youth of the “research on their research” approach and they understood that fostering intercultural relations was one of the broad goals of the research that I was conducting. Ideally, I would have investigated an already existing youth group engaged in collaborative projects, but in the absence of an already established youth of color group, I decided to organize a high school YPAR group. I utilized various primary and secondary data collection methods to better understand the particulars of how youth navigated relations within the youth coalition group as well as to better explicate the influences of larger structural issues in the wider school context. Similar to DeVault and McCoy’s (2006) description of the ethnographic process as “rather like grabbing a ball of string, finding a thread, and then pulling it” (p. 20), the



process of data collection shifted and developed organically as I immersed myself in the research site. The primary data collection methods included recording my reactions and reflections in a field journal; participant observation of youth as they engaged in collaborative projects; individual, semi-structured, pre coalition interviews with youth; and a post coalition focus group interview with the group. The secondary data collection involved interviews with teachers and administrators at the school and participant observations of the general youth population at the school. I spent two to three full days a week at the school for an entire school year (August to May) which allowed time to collect field notes, interviews, and observations.

### **Research Site**

West Victoria High School (WVHS/WV) represented an appropriate location in which to situate this research project for several reasons. The school was located in a large southern city that had a people of color demographic that was growing rapidly. During the last 5 to 10 years, the school had undergone population shifts that significantly increased the percentage of youth of color. After the construction of a new school in a neighboring affluent community, many affluent and middle class families began to leave WVHS, resulting in shifts in race and class demographics of the student body. In a conversation with an assistant principal at the school, I learned that there had been an isolated incident of ethnic tension between Black and Latino/a youth at the school. Also, WVHS had implemented an Enrichment/Acceleration block in which youth had the opportunity to meet in themed classes every Thursday and Friday, thus increasing the likelihood of student participation if the YPAR group met during this

block. For these reasons, WVHS was a suitable locale to conduct a research study of youth intercultural/interracial relations.

### **Obtaining Consent, Recruitment, and Retention**

I employed both purposeful convenience sampling as well as snowball sampling to choose participants. Participation was completely optional and free of coercion. In addition, youth could withdraw from participating in the study at any time if they chose to do so. To protect the identity of all participants, I used pseudonyms to name participants, the school, and the city. I conducted all individual and group interviews in secure school spaces.

During the pilot project that preceded this research project, I identified themes related to language and cultural differences between Black and Latino/a youth, particularly when Latino/a students had limited English proficiency. While I did not plan to specifically recruit English Language Learner (ELL) youth, it had been my experience that English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual teachers represented important starting points for connecting with multilingual, immigrant, or non-native speakers of English at the school. I also attempted to identify other teachers, particularly teachers of color at the school who had already established relationships with youth who may have been interested in participating.

At the beginning of the school year, I began working as a tutor/mentor in various capacities at WV in order to better explore the school climate as well as to volunteer my services in high-need areas at the school. I was registered as an official volunteer in the school system and had been approved by both the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and

the Victoria City Schools Research Board to conduct research with a group of students during the Thursday/Friday 50-minute Enrichment/Acceleration block. I tutored English Language Learners (ELLs), both within a social studies class and in individual groups as needed. I volunteered in the cafeteria and the “Hub<sup>5</sup>” to serve as an “extra set of hands” in monitoring students, writing tardy passes, and being a sounding board for students in need. In most of these instances, students inquired about who I was and why I was at the school, and I talked to them about starting a student group during the Enrichment/Acceleration block.

### **Establishing the Youth Coalition for Change**

The Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC) was listed as an Enrichment/Acceleration option for students and I was listed as the teacher for the class/club. At the administrators’ suggestion, I advertised the YCfC at the annual Enrichment/Acceleration Fair—a lively event typically held in the school courtyard during student lunches to kick off Enrichment/Acceleration for the school year. During this time, clubs and groups set up tables with colorful posters and information and students browsed for classes they would enjoy. By the end of the fair, I had six names of students excited to be a part of the YCfC. Other participants would eventually join through word of mouth (friends signed up and then brought other friends) and through my interaction with students in the “Hub,” Spanish classes, Spanish for Native Speakers classes, ESL classes, World History classes, and in the cafeteria during lunch.

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<sup>5</sup> A detailed description of the “Hub” is located in Chapter IV

WVHS utilized the Enrichment/Acceleration block to offer remediation, tutoring, and enrichment in a variety of content areas during a 50 minute block on Thursdays and Fridays of each week. Teachers could request to meet with students for Enrichment for retaking tests, tutoring, or practicing for End-of-Course (EOC) testing. Acceleration courses served to expose students to new ideas about a variety of topics. Also, students involved in pre-established school clubs had the opportunity to attend club meetings during the Enrichment/Acceleration block.

### **Google Docs**

The YCfC group was difficult to create and sustain due to multiple factors. First, some teacher and administrator support for the Enrichment/Acceleration program had waned during the school year of data collection. According to informal conversations with teachers, the program had been the “baby” of a previous administrator and had been implemented very differently in years past. During those previous years, teachers felt greater support from administrators for the program, had bought in to the benefits for students, and felt the program was being organized and implemented effectively. In contrast, during the year of data collection, teachers felt that some teachers and administrators simply “went through the motions” in implementing the Enrichment/Acceleration program. Additionally, they felt that giving up instructional time twice a week represented a huge waste of time. All of these factors influenced the initial recruitment and organization of the YCfC group.

Even after recruiting several students to participate in the YCfC, the structure and organization of the Enrichment/Acceleration program made it difficult to immediately

create a cohesive group. At the first of September, all WV students received information about the Enrichment/Acceleration group options; teachers instructed them to choose their first, second, and third choices. The Enrichment/Acceleration program facilitator then transferred student responses to a Google Doc. Because all teachers at WV had access to this list, when they needed a student to complete make up work or retake tests, they could “pull” the student—thus, overriding the students’ Enrichment/Acceleration request and requiring them to report to that teacher’s class. Each week, administrators posted handouts with a QR code on lockers in each hallway. Students with smart phones could scan the QR code and be linked directly to a student-friendly version of the Google Doc that instructed them where they should go for the Enrichment/Acceleration block—either to a class for *enrichment*, if they had been “pulled” by one of their teachers, or to a class for *acceleration*—a “fun” class that they had previously selected. While the QR worked for some students—primarily those who understood the Enrichment/Acceleration system, were compliant and conscientious, and had access to technology—it was extremely difficult for others. On numerous occasions, I would encounter a student who pretended to be lost in order to hang out in the halls during Enrichment/Acceleration or a recently arrived ELL student who could not find their enrichment class because they were unsure of how the process worked. After realizing that posting the QR codes did not work effectively for everyone, administrators began posting a printout of the entire Google Doc on lockers in hallways throughout the school so that students could search for their names and room numbers of their Enrichment/Acceleration class for each week. Also, as a backup, facilitators instructed 2<sup>nd</sup> period teachers to allow class time on

Thursdays and Fridays for students to reference the online version of the list to find out where they should go for Enrichment/Acceleration.

The complex process of navigating the Google Doc influenced the YCfC in many ways. First, it affected recruitment and retention of students in the group. WVHS had Enrichment/Acceleration on Thursdays and Fridays, so the initial plan was to have one group that met on Fridays of each week so that students would still have an opportunity to participate in other classes on Thursdays (retake tests, make up work, or meet with clubs). Although I communicated this to Enrichment/Acceleration facilitators early on, the form that facilitators gave students to sign up for courses did not specify this, the Google Doc was not set up for a group that met just once a week, and by default instead of one YCfC group, I was given two—one that was scheduled to meet on Thursdays and one that was scheduled to meet on Fridays. This was extremely confusing for students and contributed to the difficulty in creating a cohesive group. Eventually, a core group of YCfC students emerged and began coming on both Thursday and Friday, therefore creating one cohesive group where there had originally been two.

Although I routinely sent updated lists of YCfC members to the Enrichment/Acceleration facilitator, inevitably students would not show up on the YCfC section of the Google Doc on any given Thursday or Friday. I would assume they had been “pulled” by a content area teacher—which did happen often—but, on numerous occasions, students would find me later in the school day with questions about why they had not been assigned to the group. Although students had gained parental permission to be YCfC members, glitches in the Google Doc sometimes assigned them to study hall—a

holding tank for students who, for myriad reasons, did not have a designated Enrichment/Acceleration class. During the second semester of the school year, I was given permission to go into the google doc and manually “pull” the YCfCers. However, by this time, the core YCfC group had been well established.

In theory, the Google Doc seemed to be an efficient way to organize Enrichment/Acceleration courses; however, technical and organizational difficulties resulted in delays that significantly influenced the YCfC project. All teachers had access to the google doc, it could easily be modified, and there was space to mark attendance to alert administration if students skipped enrichment classes. However, the enormous size of the document occasionally caused operating complications and Enrichment/Acceleration had to be cancelled at times due to “technical difficulties” with the Google Doc.

The confusion of operating the Google Doc also affected the characteristics of students I recruited and retained in the YCfC. Often, due to lack of access to technology or lack of time to look up the Enrichment/Acceleration schedule, students were unsure of which classes to attend. At times students would find that they had been signed up for the wrong class, wanted to come to the YCfC, but for fear of getting in trouble, went to study hall or whichever class they were erroneously assigned to. In the data analysis chapters, I describe in detail the characteristics of students that persisted in the group; yet the complications surrounding the organization of Enrichment/Acceleration also may have significantly shaped the particular core group of students that remained. Overall, the YCfCers who persisted throughout the year were those who were willing to risk

getting in trouble for being in the wrong Enrichment/Acceleration class, those who had stopped checking the list because it was often incorrect, and those who were determined to come to YCfC even if they were not officially on the list.

Technical and organizational issues with the program most significantly affected the YCfC after the winter break. According to the original plan given to me by school administrators, Enrichment classes began in mid-September and lasted until late December. After the winter break, students returned around the first of January to do intensive review and take their final exams. After the Martin Luther King holiday, students enrolled in new courses and second semester began. As a result, Enrichment was scheduled to begin again around the end of January or the first of February.

However, a new facilitator began coordinating Enrichment/Acceleration who seemed to have more difficulty operating the Google Doc. Enrichment finally began the first of March. This delay had a tremendous influence on the momentum that we had built up during the first semester. Attempts to meet with the YCfC after school during the Jan. and February hiatus were unsuccessful and some of our YCfC members, particularly seniors intensely trying to finish senior projects, did not return to YCfC when it officially began again in March. Despite these frustrations and delays, a core group of students returned excited to continue the work we had begun in the fall.

### **Participants**

One of the challenges of creating the YCfC during the Enrichment block at the school was the weekly fluctuation of students. For example, during the month of October, our first full month of YCFC meetings, attendance fluctuated constantly:



October 2nd-9 students, October 3rd-6 students, October 9th-14 students, October 10th-8 students, October 11th-7 students, October 23rd-5 students, October 24th-8 students, October 30th-16 students, October 31st-10 students. Although attendance numbers continued to fluctuate occasionally, a core group of students emerged. Before I describe research participants that persisted throughout the year, it is important to note that my original intention was to recruit Asian, Black, and Latino/a students because those were the largest youth of color race/ethnic groups at WV. Unfortunately, I was unable to recruit any Asian participants. The Asian population at the school was relatively small—4% of approximately 1600 students—which would equal around 64 students. While I only have anecdotal and observation data to support this, the largest numbers of Asian students that I encountered at the school were either in the ESL program or the IB program. In the following chapters, I describe at length the difficulties of recruiting students in either of these programs. While I interacted with Asian youth at the school as an ESL tutor throughout the entire school year, they needed to attend ESL during Enrichment/Acceleration and were unable to join the YCfC. Nonetheless, the failure to recruit Asian participants represented a significant flaw in this research. As a result, I was unable to document the diversity within the Asian student population at the school as well as those students' thoughts about navigating intercultural/interracial relations at WV.

There were 19 official members of the YCfC (Appendix B). Below I highlight 11 students in particular who made up the core YCfC group. I identify these students as members of the core group for three main reasons: some began at the onset and stayed throughout the entire school year; others had significant influences on interaction in the

group; and some contributed thoughts and perspectives that were particularly insightful, complex, or nuanced. The brief biographies below are intended to serve as an introduction to the core group of participants. Within the data chapters, I integrate more specific information about each. Also, below I refer to certain terms (i.e. “ratchet girl” and “cultural bridge”) that I will describe more fully in the data chapters of the dissertation.

**Jaylen.** Jaylen (Black male) described himself as “gangsta”, and had recently transferred to WVHS from South Victoria in an attempt to stay out of trouble and improve his grades. Although Jaylen was originally assigned to the hip hop club, I met him early in the school year in the hallway one day. “I wanna be in your group. Can you switch me?” he asked. He began coming early in October, arriving with the characteristic shorts, chucks, graphic tees with prints of bikini-clad women, that he was well-known for, he announced with a smile, “I’mma be the leader of this group”. From then on, we always referred to Jaylen as our unofficial leader and he soon began bringing his girlfriend, Jada, to the group. His interaction with her was rough—hair tugs, pushing, grabbing, and shoving; as he became closer to another of the YCfC girls, he began treating her similarly. This was just one example of the various issues that arose during YCfC that I sought to address.

**Ariana.** Ariana (Latina) was street smart, savvy, and the main “cultural bridge” in the group. She was a leader in her social circles, assertive, and opinionated. Ariana kept “walls” around herself that were almost impermeable, and she performed a variety of different roles throughout the semester. She oscillated from being extremely happy

and talkative to barely saying a word. She was assertive and a leader in the group unless Mari was in the room—then she became silent and followed Mari’s lead. She was hyper, funny, smart, and, quick to help someone in need, but seemed disengaged with school and only did the bare minimum of what was required in her classes. She artfully performed the “ratchet girl” persona (both in Spanish and in African American Vernacular English), the “ESL student in need of help” persona (though in actuality she was fully English proficient), and many more. Individual interviews with her were very brief and I could feel her “walls” erecting as I asked her questions. Yet, on a day to day basis, we had a great relationship and she was a critically important member of the YCfC.

**Shawn.** I met Shawn (Black female) in one of the classes that I tutored. Within the first weeks of 9<sup>th</sup> grade, she had already had numerous battles with her teachers and was known for being loud and having a bad attitude in class. While I hadn’t met her officially, I saw her each week in the social studies class where I tutored a group of ESL students. During those early days, I never saw her smile and she sat turned in her desk with her back to the teacher and her arms folded. Usually at least twice a week, she and the teacher had a shouting match which usually resulted in him telling her to “Get out!” which meant to report to the “Hub” for a discipline referral. I escorted her there and she had an opportunity to air her “gripe” about how racist and disrespectful her teacher was. Although it took a long time for me to begin to penetrate the walls Shawn built around herself, she and her partner, Regina, became regulars at YCfC meetings. Although she had the ability to completely derail an entire YCfC session, which happened on a couple

of occasions, our one-on-one conversations helped her to understand that I needed her to step up as a *positive* leader in the group.

**Daniel.** Daniel's (Latino male) parents had immigrated to the US when they were teenagers. He came from a large family and had a diverse group of friends. Daniel was open, very self-confident and comfortable with a variety of different people. He enjoyed talking and his interviews (conducted on two separate occasions) were the longest of anyone in the group—over 2 hours in total. During his time at the YCfC, he lost two close family members (one to a tragic event and the other to a late-in-life illness). Daniel's matter of fact, upfront, personality was an asset to the group. He and Kaila's arguments were infamous in the group, but by the end of the year, they had become friends and he named her as one of the most influential people in our group.

**Quinten.** One of several 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the group, I witnessed Quinten (Black male) grow up during the school year. While he came to high school with the appearance and behavior of an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, by the end of year he had matured quite a bit, improved his behavior, and began to focus on his goals. Although Quinten was actually zoned for another school, he attended WVHS because his mom worked nearby and felt he would get a better education there than at his neighborhood school. In contrast to the self-described “gangstas” in the group, Quinten was well known for his urban preppie look—bright, colorful clothing, matching tennis shoes, fresh haircuts, and various superhero book bags. Prior to middle school, he had attended one of the most ethnically diverse elementary schools in the county—with demographics of 50% Hispanic, 42% Black, 8% Asian, 92% FRL, and 27% ESL.

**Diamond.** Diamond (Black female) was one of the few upperclassman in the YCfC and the only IB/honors student to remain the entire year. Although her attendance fluctuated quite a bit, she always returned to YCfC and made significant contributions to the project both in her interviews, in our informal conversations, and in her interaction with the group. Although she always spoke quietly, Diamond exuded confidence and was one of the popular girls in the school within the cheerleader and IB cliques. Diamond grew up in a predominately Black working class neighborhood, similar to most of the other YCfCers; however, her status as a former IB student seemed to place her at odds with some in the group. Other students in the group, both Black and Latino/a though they bonded with each other, didn't bond as much with Diamond. While she was often exasperated by her peers' behaviors, she was known for trying to mother/mentor/advise others in the group and was quick to tell them quietly, "You need to calm down and get your mind right". In response, they often ignored her contributions or tried to talk over her.

**Kaila.** Kaila, (Black female) had an interesting relationship with other YCfC members. While on one hand, she spoke freely about her ant-immigrant feelings, on the other hand, she represented one of the central members of the group. She was one of the first "cultural bridges" who always attempted to cross the invisible, but real race/culture and track boundaries in the group by trying to make friends. Her ready smile, happy demeanor, and "I love everybody" attitude was an asset to the group. She frequently attempted to communicate with Mari, the student who spoke the least amount of English, by using a few Spanish words her friends had taught her. "I can't wait until I learn how

to speak more Spanish. I'mma be just talking to ya'll" Kaila would frequently say.

When we decided to make time during class for students to learn how to dance bachata, she was the only one of the Black girls to jump up and attempt to dance. Also, as I began to observe YCfC members' social circles outside of our meetings, I discovered that Kaila had a more racially/culturally diverse friend circles (in school) than anyone else in the core group.

**Jayanna.** Jayanna (Black female) was one of the youngest in the group, other than Quinten, and often expressed wide-eyed shock at the older kids descriptions of their weekend escapades. She was very involved in her church, loved basketball and was a talented artist, singer, and instrumentalist. She was typically quiet and reserved in YCfC meetings, but always engaged and aware of what was going on. She was concerned about her community and eager to learn about social justice and PAR. One of the first students recruited in the group, her quiet, firm presence was a huge asset to the group. She was the only YCfCer from the first meeting, primarily attended by IB students, that persisted the entire year.

**Mari.** Mari (Latina) was one of the first students I met at WV. I tutored her in ESL class, and she enjoyed conversing with me in Spanish. She told me that she wished she had more bilingual teachers and that she would learn English much faster if someone could explain concepts to her in Spanish. Mari understood a fair amount of English, but rarely spoke it. She was older than most of her classmates, street smart, and always struck me as a teen who had been forced to grow up too soon. Mari had a magnetic personality, was flirtatious, and usually had a crowd of male and female friends around

her vying for her attention. She typically performed the Latina “glamour girl” persona and was extremely popular among the YCfC males—though some were fairly intimidated by her. Beneath her confidence and swag was a troubled teen, battling with the academic demands and frustrations of a 20 year old ESL student in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Mari had inconsistent attendance and a host of family problems. Largely because of what was perceived as lack of effort and focus, most of her teachers expected her to drop out soon. While she enjoyed the social aspects of the YCfC, in general, Mari was uninterested in most of the YCfC topics we were discussing—although she usually appeased me and tried not to be a distraction. Soon after the holidays, we received word that she was expecting a baby and that she and her boyfriend were going to move in together. On the last day that I saw her at school (during the spring of the year of data collection), she seemed happier than she had all year and seemed to be excited to move on to a different phase in her life.

**Cameron.** I affectionately referred to Cameron (Black male) as my “cousin”. Though he was born in another part of the country, months into data collection, we realized that I grew up next door to his grandmother and was close childhood friends with his aunts, uncles, and cousins. Although Cameron was very interested in playing football, he was new to the school and had to wait until the following year to play. Similar to other YCfCers, he talked frequently about trying to stay out of trouble. His personality and smile made him a favorite of many teachers and administrators, but his stubbornness and constant assertions of “I’m a man!” often landed him in minor trouble for refusing to follow teachers’ directives. Though Cameron grew up in an all-Black

neighborhood and navigated in all-black social circles, he had an easy going personality and eventually bonded with everyone in the group.

**Santiago.** Although Santiago (Latino male) was Salvadorian, the YCfCers playfully teased him that looked like he was from somewhere else (goatee, dark skin and wavy afro-style hair). In fact, his friends had adopted him into the Mexican culture and given him the nickname “Sancho”. Santiago was easy going, kind, funny, yet quiet and reserved. He was the student that would stay and help me clean up or hold the door for me to bring bags in the school. He drew amazing life-like sketches of everything from guns to people and bonded with Jayanna over their mutual affinity for art and music. Throughout this dissertation, I talk at length about Santiago’s brushes with gangs, drugs, and the law. At the time of data collection, he had committed to “starting over and being different” and spent most of his time doing school work and playing soccer with his dad and friends.

### **Facilitating YCfC Meetings**

Implementing a curriculum for the YCfC represented one of the most challenging aspects of the project. I had numerous goals in mind; the curriculum needed to: 1) raise students’ critical consciousness to issues facing communities of color 2) introduce students to the principles of youth participatory action research 3) foster intercultural/interracial dialogue and interaction in the group 4) incorporate media, poetry, spoken word, music, and art 5) privilege student voices and encourage them to step up as leaders in the group. Because YPAR was the crux of the project, I reached out to YPAR scholars to collect resources and ideas. Shawn Ginwright, Associate Professor



at San Francisco State, placed me in contact with one of his colleagues, Aaron Nakai, who had coordinated several YPAR projects in California. During a phone conversation and follow up emails, Aaron and I spoke about implementing YPAR projects and he provided me with many resources for beginning the project. Also, I communicated with a local YPAR scholar who had led groups of pre-college students in conducting YPAR projects. These resources enabled me to create my own curriculum that was specific to the stated goals and objectives.

While I entered the project with a semi-structured, yet fluid idea of the YCfC curriculum, as a part of the youth studies theoretical framework, I understood the importance of allowing students to make decisions about how we would operate our group. As I began to compile activities and lessons that spoke to these objectives, I continuously wondered, *Will youth be disengaged by a “curriculum” that feels too much like school? How can I create a curriculum that motivates, engages, and challenges them?* As Joseph (2000) described, students and teachers are “not merely docile actors in a scripted cultural play but dynamic creators of meaning” (p. 18). From the onset of the semester, I encouraged youth not to view our time together as “class,” according to the stereotypical, solely teacher-directed definition of class. I continually reminded them that they were the YCfC leaders and that I had some ideas of what we could accomplish, but that we needed to make decisions together. Our co-constructed curriculum consisted of three main goals: learning about YPAR and the language of social justice and change, building solidarity as a group and focusing on intercultural communication; and observing and dialoguing about issues occurring in the city and nation including the

Black lives matter movement and the executive order on immigration. In order to achieve these goals, our meetings focused on delving into our personal and family stories; coordinating activities to foster collaboration and solidarity among the group; discussing protest movements and increased activism occurring throughout the city and the nation; and learning to think of ourselves as change agents. In the paragraphs below, I provide an overview of activities that I used to teach, engage, and motivate YCfCers. Although I have included anecdotal details about student reactions to some of the activities, I include more detailed descriptions about students' impressions of YCfC activities in the data chapters that follow in which I analyze how observations of YCfC sessions, in conjunction with interview data, provided rich information about student cliques at WV, enabled students to reflect upon their intersectional identities, and contributed to bonding among different race/ethnicity students in the group.

The early meetings of the YCfC focused on introducing students to the principles of YPAR, organizing ourselves as a group, and reflecting on our individual and group identities. To learn more about YPAR and the language of liberation, empowerment, and social justice, we began most of our group sessions by discussing a quote. I used quotes by Audre Lorde, Freire, Ghandi, Cesar Chavez and other activists and encouraged students to draw, write, or discuss the meanings. To begin introducing the concept of YPAR to the group, I utilized several media clips and websites of other youth engaged in change projects. These included the iSeed project in California (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPOSojx9yY0>) and the Voyces of Chicago project (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L25zCvH5y10>). Though I talked to the students

about what YPAR entailed, the concept was unclear to many of them. “So what’s this group all about?” “What exactly are we going to be doing here?” were common questions they asked, so I felt that students would benefit from viewing other youth who were involved in social justice-oriented projects. As we learned about YPAR, I began introducing YCfCers to terms like empowerment, activism, deficit ideology, and positionality. Using Sensoy and Diangelo’s (2011) graphic of a pair of eyeglasses, students brainstormed and discussed their views of the world, how these perceptions related to their experiences, cultures, values, and upbringing, and why thinking about positionality matters in YPAR research. This activity served as an appropriate segue way to completing activities about “multicultural selves” (Appendix C) in which students discussed how they viewed themselves as cultural beings and how this impacted the issues they cared about and how they saw the world around them. Also, during October, we began discussing issues in the school and brainstorming potential projects for implementing changes. Students decided that they wanted to raise the awareness of their peers and teachers to issues of police brutality as well as President Obama’s Executive Order on Immigration.

We began reciting the poem “Deepest Fear” (Appendix D) as a group at the start of every meeting. I felt there was something very powerful about speaking the powerful words of the poem together as a group. However, after nudging students to do it for a few weeks, they asked if we could vote not to do the poem anymore. Months after we stopped doing it, one student came and told me that she enjoyed reading the poem together and missed it.

Simultaneously to discussing YPAR, we also discussed the logistics of how we wanted to operate our group. One of the initial tasks for students was to decide if they felt their group needed a student leader/facilitator. I informed students early on that I studied intercultural/interracial relations among students of color and that I would be observing their interaction as a group as they learned more about themselves, each other, social justice, and implementing change in their school and community. Throughout our time together, I continually urged them to step up to lead and facilitate the group. I realized early in the school year that the ideas that I presented to them were new and strange—the way we were attempting to operate the group perhaps ran counter to their past school experiences, which were primarily teacher-directed with little individual autonomy and decision making about class content and procedures. Large group discussions continued to be difficult for students, so to create norms and a mission statement, I organized students into small, racially diverse groups and gave suggestions about how to approach the task (Appendix E). Group 1 brainstormed about what the purpose and goals of the YCfC should be. Collectively, they created a mission statement (Appendix F). Group 2 brainstormed ideas about what YCfC meetings should look like. I encouraged them to reflect on the meetings we had had up to that point and to think about what worked and what needed to change. They decided that members were engaging in some behaviors that were especially distracting to the group (i.e. throwing food and interrupting each other) and that we needed to establish some norms about how we would behave. I gave Group 3 the tasks of figuring out, based on the mapping and needs assessment work we completed at the previous meeting, what types of mini-

projects the YCfC could engage in as we prepared to do a larger scale YPAR project in the spring. They brainstormed ideas such as a car wash, field trips, and a fashion show. After we completed the group projects, students posted the mission statement, norms, and potential projects on the corkboard in our meeting space.

At the end of the first semester, I began to engage YCfCers in more explicit conversations about cross cultural dialogue and interracial/intercultural relations throughout the school. We began to discuss our “linked fate” as people of color and I invited students to think about problems that their communities were facing (Appendices G and M). Media clips like the “Unequal Opportunity Race” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBb5TgOXgNY>) made a significant impression on students as we delved into terms like privilege, power, institutional racism, and critical consciousness. In small groups, students brainstormed meanings of the term and as a large group we talked about what we as YCfCers wanted to be critically conscious about. Students brainstormed issues that were important to them and that they wanted to learn more about such as Fruitville Station, Michael Brown, Ferguson, MI, police shootings, Republicans taking over Congress, and the Ebola outbreak across the country. We discussed ways to protest and reasons why people protest. Another media clip that students enjoyed was a spoken word performance, “Slip of the tongue” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8ad6c-aGt0&noredirect=1>) by an Asian teenager named Lum in which she delved into issues about fighting assimilation, valuing her culture, and critiquing gender stereotypes. As students learned new concepts raised in the media clips, they continued making posters to raise awareness about the issues we were

discussing. We continued to use news and media clips to reinforce and jump start our large and small group discussions. Although I had been prepping students to conduct a large scale YPAR project throughout the entire year and kept urging the group to make a final decision about what our project would be, YCfCers collectively decided that they did not want to do a project and that they would rather spend their time together doing what we had been doing—learning about social change, making posters in the school to raise awareness, and having discussions about things going on in the world.

Interspersed throughout the year as we raised our awareness to social issues, we also focused on building solidarity as a group. I engaged the YCfCers in engaging games and activities to encourage them to get up, get moving, and interact with one another. For example, in one activity, each student had to strike a unique, signature pose. When I shouted “go”, everyone had to move and try to tag someone else. If you were tagged, you had to change your signature pose to the pose of the person who had tagged you. The game was fun, chaotic, got students up and moving, and encouraged them to break out of their individual cliques and mingle with others. In addition to adding games and movement-based activities, I felt that it was important to make our meetings multilingual, so I routinely spoke in English, Spanish, and Spanglish to try to engage everyone in the room. Also, I designated bilingual students in the YCfC as translators to help me explain concepts in Spanish. I wanted English-only YCfCers to become accustomed to hearing Spanish being spoken and not to feel threatened by it. Student body language showed that some YCfCers liked it (smiles, laughter, questions about words), while others did not (eye rolls, deep sighs, uncomfortable looks). During our meetings, we typically took

time to share “Good News Reports” during which students talked about good things that were happening to them. As YCfCers began to bond with one another, they were more open to sharing important events in their lives: “I’m going to be an uncle;” “I can’t wait for Homecoming—I just got my dress;” “I’m going to a party with my friends this weekend;” “I’m going to the mall after school to buy the new Jordans;” “I was watching TV and saw one of the protests we’ve been talking about.”

In the spring of the school year, YCfCers began to emerge as leaders in the group in coordinating their own activities. One of these included a song project in which students shared songs that spoke to parts of their lives. During this session, students touched on themes of love, loss, relationships with family and friends, hopes for the future, and even past issues with drugs and crime. As we listened to the songs, each YCfCer had the opportunity to discuss how the music represented something important to them. Although the song project seemed to be more of a “get to know one another” activity more appropriate for initial meetings, students had been too suspicious and untrusting of each other to share personal stories early in the school year. Their willingness to play music and expose small nuggets of their personal lives in connection with the song was a result of numerous attempts at collaboration and breaking down walls and barriers between groups.

### **Data Collection and Management**

Data collection at WVHS was ongoing throughout the school year. From August 2014 to May 2015, I conducted observations of hallways, classes, lunchrooms, and after school events to collect background information on the school and student body. These

observations continued throughout the school year and represented an integral part of data collection. After I recruited YCfC participants, I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews to collect baseline data about youth's friendship groups, patterns of interaction, perceptions of their peers at the school, and feelings about cross-cultural interaction. I intended for the YCfC to be a youth-led group in which I served as facilitator, yet I acknowledge that my active role as a participant in the research study impacted the dynamics of data collection. Therefore, during times when I was not able to record observations during YCfC meetings, I used a field journal to record my reactions, impressions, and observations after YCfC sessions, particularly the ones in which I took a more active role as a participant.

With participant consent, I audio recorded focus groups and all individual interviews with a digital audio recorder. I handwrote data that I collected through observations and I maintained a field journal both in print and electronically. I transcribed digital recordings, typed written observations, and stored all electronic data on the secure UNCG server and on my personal password-locked laptop. I stored the original audio recordings and hand written observation logs in a locked box in my home. Below, I describe in detail each type of data source that I collected during the research study. In designing methods and analysis of a qualitative study, Lather (2003) argued that at a minimum the research design must reflect, "triangulation of methods, data sources and theories, reflexive subjectivity, face validity, and catalytic validity" (p. 206). In the following paragraphs, I outline my effort to address these issues through trustworthiness in data collection and analysis.



## **Participant Observation**

I used participant observation as one form of data collection, which allowed me, as an ethnographer, to explore the social context that shaped the experiences and perspectives of participants. During the school year, I observed classrooms, hallways, the lunchroom, the “Hub,” student gathering/hang out spots, and YCfC meetings. Written participant observations were distinct from the field journal entries; however, both were critically important in painting a picture of both youth agency and the real, material influences of societal structures on youth interaction.

## **Individual and Focus Group Interviews**

During the fall of the year of data collection, I conducted 15 individual, semi-structured youth interviews (see Appendix H) to explore youth thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of themselves, their relations with other-ethnicity peers, challenges they face in the school, and the degree to which they had interacted and would want to work collaboratively with others whom they perceived as different. I conducted interviews in a conference room at the school during the school day and sessions lasted 30-45 minutes. Building rapport with youth was critically important in this study. For some participants, the individual interviews represented our first one-on-one interaction, so I attempted to make the experience as comfortable, informal, and engaging as possible with the understanding that building rapport takes extensive time and patience. I often began interviews by asking participants to describe their backgrounds, families, and hobbies. Then, I transitioned to asking questions about their past and present feelings and experiences in interacting with other races/ethnicities in both academic and social settings

in their school or community. Also, I conducted 4 teacher/administrator interviews to ascertain adult perspectives on the history of WV, school climate, and student relations.

I used focus group interviews as a way of triangulating individual interviews. I conducted one semi-structured final focus group interview (Appendix H) with the core YCfC group. After a year of working collaboratively, I was able to delve more deeply into youth's thoughts and feelings around intercultural interaction. During this time, I also explored potential shifts in thinking, as well as overall feelings and perceptions of the YCfC experience.

### **Artifact Review**

I collected and reviewed copies of youth-generated posters, journal reflections, letters, and other media created by the YCfC. I used the artifact review as a way to glean further information about youth perceptions of YCfC coalition activities in general and about intercultural interaction with peers in the group more specifically. Although I attempted to build rapport and put participants at ease during the process, it is important to acknowledge the age, race, gender, or class differences between me and the participants. Therefore, artifacts represented important means of triangulating findings from interview and focus group data collected by giving participants the opportunity to express themselves more freely as they navigated the collaborative space of the YCfC.

### **Field Journal**

The field journal represented a critically important data collection method. Particularly because of the participatory quality of the study, I did not always have an opportunity to record impressions and reactions during YCfC meetings. So, field journal

entries played an important role in capturing in-the-moment reactions that would have otherwise been lost. Also the journal assisted me in reflecting upon my role as facilitator in the coalition, in interrogating my role of privilege in the group, and in working through an understanding of how the ways I positioned myself in relation to youth came to bear on the project in general.

### **Data Analysis**

Data sources consisted of individual semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, field notes from participant observations, reflexive field journal entries, and other written information generated by the YCfC. I used NVivo (qualitative data analysis program) reports and hard copies of all interview transcripts and archival data to analyze the data collected. Using NVivo, I coded and analyzed data by categorizing, exploring, and interrogating data to illuminate emergent themes regarding ways in which youth's perceptions remained constant, shifted, or changed throughout the year (Hatch, 2002).

In outlining various types of qualitative data analysis models, Hatch (2002) described that a political analysis model is “designed to accommodate critical/feminist epistemological assumptions that all knowledge is subjective and political and that researcher values frame the inquiry” (p. 201). Researchers who use a political analysis model acknowledge from the onset that all research is political and are explicit about the political ideas that frame and influence their work. Although Hatch recognized that some would disagree, he contended that many feminist find political data analysis useful and appropriate, particularly those who describe their work as political and view little conflict between critical and poststructural approaches. For researchers who do not necessarily

frame their inquiry in political terms, Hatch suggested that a polyvocal approach may be more appropriate. A polyvocal analysis approach involves “finding ways to listen to many voices in our data and exploring ways to tell many stories in our findings” (p. 202). Although political and polyvocal data analysis approaches reflect a wide range of epistemological positions, Hatch (2002) described that the steps of each are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In maintaining consistency between the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, ethnographic methodology described in this chapter, and robust data analysis procedures outlined by Hatch, I combined both a polyvocal and political analysis approach. In political data analysis, Hatch described that the researcher should,

- Write a self-reflexive statement explicating your ideological positionings and identifying ideological issues you see in the context under investigation.
- Read the data, marking places where issues related to your ideological concerns are evident.
- Study marked places in the data, then write generalizations that represent potential relationships between your ideological concerns and the data.
- Negotiate meanings with participants, addressing issues of consciousness raising, emancipation, and resistance. (p. 192)

In using a polyvocal approach, after reading data for a “sense of the whole” the next step involved “identify[ing] all of the voices contributing to the data” (p. 202). Hatch described polyvocal data analysis as follows:

- Read the data, marking places where particular voices are heard.
- Study the data related to each voice, decide which voices will be included in your report, and write a narrative telling the story of each selected voice.
- Read the entire data set, searching for data that refine or alter your stories.
- Write revised stories that represent each voice to be included. (p. 202)

By merging Hatch's (2002) description of both a political and polyvocal data analysis model, I maintained a stronger consistency between theory, method, and data analysis—allowing theory to guide all facets of the project including the research questions, design, and approach to data analysis. To choose one model over the other would obscure the overall social critique and desire for change in interracial/intercultural relations that shapes my motivation to conduct this inquiry (political) or silence the equally important goal of allowing space for youth agency, difference, tension, or conflict in collaborative spaces (polyvocal).

In summary, a thorough description of the ethnographic methodology, participants, research site, and procedures for data analysis was necessary for framing the data chapters that follow and for setting the scene for a more detailed explication of the ways in which students navigated interaction in the school and in the YCfC. Also, in this chapter I provided a detailed explanation of the process of creating and sustaining the Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC). While the detailed description of the YCfC perhaps traversed the boundaries between describing the methodology and explaining the results of the study, I felt that it was necessary to paint a picture of the environment in which students' navigated interracial/intercultural relation. In the chapters that follow, I outline the prominent themes that emerged from the ethnography of youth of color at WVHS.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SUBURBAN TO URBAN**

As I approach the study of interracial/intercultural relations through ethnographic research methods, a contextual description of the research site is critical. If we think of this as a story in which the youth participants were actors engaged in interracial/intercultural dialogue, then WVHS, with all of its history, personalities, and recent struggles, represented the scenery and backdrop on which this entire story is built. I spent numerous hours conducting observations in the school; engaging in conversations with students, administrators, staff, and faculty; and examining teachers' and students' thoughts and perspectives about their school. WVHS's shift from a predominately suburban, White school to a predominately urban, people of color school was a recurring theme, particularly in conversations with faculty, staff, and administration. This had implications for interracial/intercultural relations at the school. While there were individuals and school structures that contributed to the segregation at WV, others resisted these norms and tried to create a more inclusive, diverse environment.

#### **Urban as Coded Language**

WVHS, though characterized by some participants as an urban school was located in a suburban locale on the outskirts of Victoria. Before I provide a detailed explanation

of the shift that occurred in WV's student demographics, I provide background on widely ranging connotations of the word "urban". Traditionally, urban implied the geographical location and characteristics of schools in large cities (Milner, 2012). Yet, the word has also been used to denote environments with larger populations of students of color or students experiencing poverty (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012, p. 2). Often in these descriptions, urban becomes coded language for deficit, unsafe, delinquent, and lacking (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012). According to Milner (2011), "To suggest that all urban schools, neighborhoods, people, and other-related contexts are substandard would be unfairly inaccurate. There are some powerfully-rich knowledge, culture, and opportunity inherent in urban spaces; yet these resources are too often ignored and/or underexplored" (p. 67). To illustrate common understandings of "urban," Milner described his visit to a school system to talk about culturally relevant pedagogy. The school, described by school leaders as "their urban school", was located in a small rural community, but was comprised of predominately Black, Latino, and poor White students, and had problems with testing. While Milner seemed to disagree with the characterization of the school as urban he conceded that:

There is not a clear, uniformed, common definition related to what most of us in higher education mean by urban. Researchers, theoreticians, policymakers, and practitioners in higher education do not necessarily possess a shared definition of what is meant by urban education. This same lack of clarity is likely the case in P-12 institutions. (Milner, 2012, p. 557)

Milner urged scholars of urban education to put forth more specific terms that describe the depth and breadth of what urban means in various contexts. Then, he suggested three

classifications that could more accurately describe the vastly different school contexts that now all fall under the “urban” umbrella. *Urban Intensive*—densely populated schools in cities with over 1 million inhabitants; *Urban Emergent*—schools in large cities that are not as large as urban intensive cities, but that still experience lack of resources; *Urban Characteristic*—schools in suburban or rural areas in cities that may not be as large as emergent or intensive environments, but that are beginning to experience issues previously associated with larger cities such as increased populations of immigrant students (Milner, 2012, p. 560). The size of Victoria and the challenges faced by many schools there would place WV in the *Urban Emergent* category.

The use of the word “urban” to describe WV held both positive and negative connotations. As I describe in subsequent paragraphs, WV experienced a demographic shift from a White suburban, slightly agricultural population to a predominately urban Black population. However, the ways that WV’s urbanness was understood varied. For some, particularly teachers who resisted the demographic shift, perceptions of the change at WV was influenced by deficit ideas about schools predominated by youth of color—namely that increased minority populations meant increased drug activity, crime, and the demise of a good school. For other teachers, urbanness at the school meant an opportunity to explore the richness of new cultures and new traditions at WV. For some of the students, urbanness was synonymous with hip hop culture, fashion, and trendiness. In essence, I argue that the WV context served to further complicate the term “urban” and added credence to scholars’ descriptions of the complexity of the term. To understand WV’s ongoing shift from suburban to urban, it was important to understand the history of



the area—the new schools constructed, the development and renewal that was spreading throughout the area, the White flight away from Victoria, and school redistricting in the area.

### **The “Old” WVHS**

Over the past decade, WVHS experienced significant shifts in race and class demographics. Traditionally, WV was considered a rural, community-based, White school located on the outskirts of the city. Long time WVHS teacher, Todd Atkins described that WV was known as “redneck tech” and recounted playing football against the school in the early ‘80s and witnessing “the confederate battle flag” flying in the stands. Atkins, a White male in his late 40’s, worked at WVHS for over a decade and was himself a product of the Victoria City Schools. He described his early experiences with desegregation in the city:

I am the product of the first integrated school system. I graduated from South Victoria in 1984. My first grade class was the first group integrated. My family was in a lower middle class neighborhood...I went to South Victoria and it was called “South Chocolate” for a reason.

In order to address overcrowding at WVHS (the school was one of the biggest in the state at that time) the district began opening new high schools—first, one about 5 miles away in the western part of the city and then another slightly closer to the center of the city. Although these changes affected WV in reducing the overall size of the school, its racial and socioeconomic demographics remained relatively stable during this time. Assistant Principal Steve Tower, a Black male in his mid-40s, who began his teaching

career outside of Victoria, recounted some of his initial impressions of race and class tension in Victoria:

When I moved here [Victoria] 8 years ago, I started teaching at South Victoria High School—that was a school on the state’s list as being one of those schools that would possibly be reconstituted. We had a football game and the parents from WVHS were on their side chanting "get your scores up" (clap, clap—clap, clap, clap) and I heard that and I was like, that's the absolute worst thing for an adult to be saying to groups of kids. But the arrogance of it was you are beneath us.

Tower went on to describe the irony of this situation. In 2010, a new high school, Magon High (MH) was constructed nearby in an area known for having a high percentage of upper middle class families. As a result, the district was redrawn, most of WV’s White population went to the new school, and minority and lower income students who would normally have gone to South Victoria High School—the same school that parents from WVHS were taunting years ago—now attended WVHS. According to faculty and administrators interviewees, over the course of the summer of 2010, WVHS went from having a student body that was approximately 7% Black to one that was 57% Black and from 7 or 8% free and reduced lunch to 47%.

The drastic demographic shift at WVHS resulted in racial/cultural and class tension between a predominately White teaching staff and a predominately Black student body—the memory of which was still very much present in the minds of teachers and administrators four years later during the year of data collection. Even those teachers who had not yet been hired during the time of the shift frequently mentioned tensions between the “old” WVHS and the “new” WVHS. Assistant principal Steve Tower, who

believes he was hired to help “control” the school’s urban Black students, particularly the males, explains that,

The change took place but the staff didn't change--the staff mentality didn't change; the staff's expectations didn't change. So they were trying to run the same play in the classroom with different kids, you know, and that didn't work...Some teachers, who could, left. And they left sour. The school went through three or four different principals in one year. The previous principal here finally came in and put some stability to it.

Veteran teacher, Todd Atkins, and security officer Floyd Smith, who both worked at WVHS for over 10 years, shared similar sentiments. Atkins described: “teachers who had taught certain students felt like they couldn't deal with our new student population and they left...And so I heard that people have said ‘well they're ruining our school’ and I’m like, ‘no they're kids.’” Atkins, whose own children attended WVHS after the shift, described that the teachers who stayed did so because they loved the school and community. He and others sought to create a culture change in the school and encouraged students (and other teachers) to embrace the “new” WVHS. According to Atkins it was not only the teachers who struggled with the new WVHS, but the students as well.

A lot of kids never expected to go to West Victoria...you had kids that really had thought all their lives they were gonna be going to South Victoria or somewhere else and ended up at West, and so we had to work on creating an identity for ourselves and rebuilding ourselves.

According to Atkins, he knew that the school had made progress in this area when after years of struggle, students finally began “repping” WV outside of school by proudly wearing school t-shirts at the mall and in other spaces in the community.

### **The “New” WVHS**

At the time of data collection, the population at WV consisted of approximately 1600 students, 80% of which were students of color (60% Black, 16% Latino, and 4% Asian). Sixty-one percent of students at WV qualified for free or reduced lunch. WV was located on the edge of a large city in the Southeast United States. The main part of the school was a sprawling breeze-way style design—it had a central outdoor walk with buildings located in wings to the left and right. It had a very open-air feel with several outdoor courtyards between buildings which between classes were filled with students engaged in lively dialogue. During classes, it was common to see the ROTC classes, a popular elective among students, practicing marching around the breezeway and courtyards.

At the time of data collection, the school had designated a classroom toward the west end of the campus as the “the Hub” which was typically operated by front office staff members and security personnel that worked at the school. Officially, the staff in the Hub processed attendance concerns, served as a “holding tank” for students waiting to see an administrator for discipline issues, handled tardy passes, and supervised lunch detention. Although there were periods of time during the year when the Hub was returned, by force and coercion, to its original, intended, solemn atmosphere, for much of the school year it was a lively, bustling space filled with humor and laughter. Troubled

students received a kind, inspirational word there, angry students received a stern, but often loving reprimand, seniors came to joyfully announce that they'd passed their senior projects, and teachers stopped by to whisper about the news and gossip of the day.

During my Hub observations, I learned much about the climate of WV high school from the students' perspectives—what the students cared about, which teachers and administrators they trusted, which teachers they thought were racist, which teachers cared about the students, which teachers were just biding their time until they could get away from the school, what students really hated about Magon (the nearby rival school), which students were friends, which groups were rivals, and more. As students sat and watched the clock waiting for an administrator to come talk to them about whatever skirmish had occurred that had resulted in them being expelled from class and banished to the Hub, I usually approached and sat in a desk next to them. Some were hesitant to talk to adults in general and others were unsure of who I was and whether or not I was a teacher; however, usually a simple, “So you got in trouble in Ms. Such and Such's class?” opened a floodgate of conversation as they rushed to defend themselves and describe how Ms. Such and Such just had it out for them. I found that a listening ear, a friendly face, and a nonjudgmental countenance went a long way toward prompting students to open up about their thoughts and feelings. Some of these students that I encountered in the Hub during my early days at the school went on to become my tutees, mentees, or research participants in the YCfC, or just those kids that would find me in the hallways, the mall, or the local Walmart to say, “What's up!”

## Differing Perceptions of WVHS

Participants held differing perceptions of the present-day culture and issues at WVHS. Of the teacher/administrators that I interviewed, many of their stories of the “old” WVHS were similar. They described the demographic shift, the high turnover of staff, and the past racial/cultural clashes that occurred. Atkins (White male, late 40’s, native of Victoria, long time teacher at the school) described stories that, although filled with descriptions of his appreciation of and experiences with diversity, also possessed an undercurrent of traditional and assimilationist notions. For example, when describing his thoughts about staff that left because they were unable to adapt to the new population of students, Atkins explained, “It’s our responsibility to number one, teach them who we are and number two, adapt and figure out who they are, and help them become who we are.” So while Atkins obviously appreciated the diversity that students brought, there still remained a sentiment of *they will be better when they’re more like us*. While on one hand he perceived the culture shift as positive (Atkins: “the variety—the richness of our student population has changed us for the better”), he also yearned to maintain the previous WV identity and traditions (Atkins: “I have tried really hard in the first years after the shift to get kids to understand how we do things, what are our cultures and such”). Particularly in his descriptions of new populations of immigrant students, Atkins described the need for students to assimilate into the traditions of the school, the local community, and the state:

Really this year more than ever, I’m seeing more direct immigrants as opposed to people who have come to the US and moved here from somewhere else. A

number of direct immigrants really that speak very little English. And indoctrinating them into our culture is difficult. The first thing is to indoctrinate them into what it means to be an American and what it means to be a part of this state.

While Atkins espoused an acceptance of difference and diversity, it was a qualified acceptance based on students' ability to change and adhere to a mainstream ideal.

Similar, yet conflicting, themes emerged in discussions with Tower, who felt the school, culture, and teachers were not culturally responsive enough.

If school is not cognizant of their [students of color] cultural issues, if they're not culturally relevant, school becomes traditional and it supports the people who are most successful at it--that would be White girls. You're not going to be that successful in school unless it acknowledges your differences...in a teachers' meeting, they were talking about disproportionality of minority and special ed. students being suspended and when that was mentioned then you could almost see the withdrawal—people often think that if we talk about cultural diversity I'm calling you a racist [laughs].

Similar to Atkins, Tower's stories reflected conflicting themes of cultural assimilation; yet, differently, Tower's approach to students was based on his own personal experiences as a student of color growing up in an urban school.

Tower: I'll be quite frank. I was successful in school because I assimilated. I accepted the bending and the molding of that teacher in order to survive. In doing so, you have to give up some of your alpha maleness. Alpha males will rarely be successful in the school—in a traditional school—because they're just not willing to bend from who they are. And sit down because you told me to [laughs].

Cherese: So when you're talking to the kids, do you feel like you're saying that you've gotta let some of that go, you gotta assimilate?

Tower: Well it's survival tactics without having to compromise the culture of who you are. I realized for example that the police are not going to change so I have to

realize that when I get pulled over it's a different set of rules and my goal is to get home, you know? And therefore I'm gonna monitor what I say; monitor what I do. For them [WVHS students] they've gotta walk in and escape the traps and learn a way to kind of successfully navigate through all of the obstacles that they're gonna have to go through.

Tower's stories showed that he continued to struggle with what he called the "bending and molding" that was required for people of color, particularly Black males, to achieve mainstream acceptance. While he felt that he was occasionally applauded for his work with troubled students, he stated with bitterness: "I don't get to speak on the intercom. I don't get to speak at parent meetings. I don't get to speak at staff meetings—but when there's a problem, radio, and I'm Johnny on the spot".

Tower also perceived that deficit perspectives about students and the school were pervasive at WVHS. Although he highlighted the deficit thinking of White teachers, he described this as a problem with Black teachers as well.

I would say this, to a large degree, there's still a White/Black or White/minority issue, but there's also a Black/Black issue too. There's some Black teachers who aren't culturally relevant either—so they have adopted a deficit thinking when it comes to our students.

Different than my experiences working in high schools in East Reddingsdale (the pilot study) where students regularly cursed at teachers, got in fights, set fires in the bathroom, refused to go to class, congregated in the hallways all day, and wore gang colors, I found WV to be a calmer and more positive environment than my previous encounters with urban high schools. Similar to high schools everywhere, there were definitely discipline problems, students who smoked weed in the bathrooms, occasional fights, and students



who skipped school; but, overall the school could be described as *orderly*. Students were by and large compliant, went to class when they were supposed to, and followed their teachers' directives. While some students were street savvy and knowledgeable about drugs, alcohol, gangs, and the criminal elements in the city, they were also polite and respectful. In response to questions about WV's reputation as a "bad" school, Tower responded:

Truthfully, they're not that bad. Even South Victoria wasn't that bad, but WV, our kids are not bad kids. They're just some cultural mismatches and some disbelief in education. We have 1600 kids maybe 1% or 2% are our discipline problems. That's 50 or 60 kids out of 1600 so you know, it's a small group—most of them are trying and they'll try when they know they have support, but if they walk into a classroom and they're almost made to feel like they don't belong...

Interestingly, observations and interviews showed that perspectives on WV school culture differed between students and teachers with students expressing more positive opinions of the school, while teachers expressed more negative opinions. For example, for some faculty members, the fact that the school served an urban, predominately Black population with high numbers of poor/working class kids was synonymous with "problem," and "troubled." In several observations of a particular class at the school, a social studies teacher, Mr. Jones, repeatedly shouted for students to sit down and blew a whistle to get their attention, saying to the class, "This is not going to work!" Perhaps to assert his dominance and "no nonsense" attitude, he kept a poster of the infamous Scarface character, Tony Montana, on the wall near his desk. In the picture, Tony Montana held a machine gun and the famous words from the movie were typed at the

bottom: “Say hello to my little friend,” the words that Montana shouted as he opened fire on a crowd of his enemies. Mr. Jones often became so angry with his students that he began to pace and sweat. At the end of one class, he remarked to me, “In all my years teaching, I’ve never seen kids this bad. Too many of them have behavior problems, learning disabilities, and can’t speak English.”

Student interviews showed different perspectives. When asked how he felt about attending WV, Quinten responded, “It’s a good thing cuz I know it’s a good school.” He went on to explain that he was actually zoned for a different high school, but that his mother had chosen to send him to WVHS because she felt he would get a good education there. Student interviewees described WV as “fun,” “calm,” and “boring,” in contrast with other schools in Victoria that they described as “really bad,” “ratchet” “had a lot of fights” and “had a lot of gangs.” I hesitate to imply a false dichotomy in which all of the teachers were frustrated and unhappy at the school, while all of the students felt it was a good place. There were teachers that emphasized students’ strengths and lauded recent gains made by the school, while a student interviewee described at length why her mother wanted to transfer her because of the school’s bad reputation. Yet, despite these exceptions, overall the teachers and administrators seemed frustrated and weary with the atmosphere at the school. In fact, the school principal that began the school year at the time of data collection had already announced his plan to leave by the spring of the same school year.

## **WV/Magon Race Relations**

One of WVHS's main rivals was Magon High, the "wealthy" school that opened and forced the redistricting of WVHS's students. The opening of Magon, located further away from the core of Victoria, prompted the White flight out of WV. While the location of WVHS did not change, the way it was characterized had changed drastically. Widely accepted characterizations of the schools were that Magon was White, affluent, and resourced while WV was Black, struggling, and had a criminal element. Yet, teachers and students who had direct experiences with both told different, more complex stories. According to a WV teacher, Mr. Charles, who had worked both places, Magon was not a perfect place, but tended to keep bad reports about the school from reaching the media. He recounted issues of rampant drug use, attempted suicides, classism, and parents' elitist attitudes. Charles stated, "Kids here at WV might sell drugs, but the kids at Magon are the ones that are coming here to buy them."

Themes of tension with Magon rose on multiple occasions with YCfC member, Diamond, a cheerleader at the school. She described that WV cheerleading was undergoing a culture shift from traditional cheering to what she commonly referred to as "stomp and shake" (Historically Black College Style) cheerleading. As the team began to increasingly introduce "stomp and shake," Diamond explained, more girls of color joined the team and whites began to quit. At the time of data collection the varsity team was 100% Black with one Latina on JV. Diamond recounted a story that occurred earlier in her cheering career where a WV teacher instructed student interns not to film the cheerleaders for an episode of WVNN (West Victoria News Network), a student-led

news channel broadcast at the school, stating that the cheerleaders' dances were inappropriate. In a different conversation, Diamond shared stories of racial incidents that occurred between WV and Magon cheerleaders. According to Diamond, during a sporting event the previous year, Magon parents and students yelled racial slurs at WV cheerleaders and left bananas on WV campus. According to Diamond, nothing was done about the situation and the issue had resurfaced at a recent sporting event when individuals in the Magon student section yelled that WV cheerleaders were "monkeys." After the game, the "battle" continued on Instagram and Twitter as students, primarily cheerleaders, from both schools hurled insults back and forth. For Diamond, who was serious about her aspirations of cheering at a four-year college in the future, the most hurtful blow was a meme that circulated for weeks depicting a photo of the WV cheering squad, with the words, "Headed to Community College." For her, this reaffirmed the belief that the Magon school and community looked down on WV, thought they were "thugs," and wanted to publically ridicule them. When I suggested that she work with administration to resolve the virtual bullying, she refused saying, "They're not going to do anything—they never do. The athletic director should have done something about what happened at the game. We'll just end up getting in trouble about stuff we said about them on Twitter."

### **Tracking and Segregation between IB and Regular Ed**

Tracking and segregation at WVHS created an environment ripe for race/culture cliques to form at the school. Reminiscent of desegregation literature detailing the role of tracking in maintaining segregation (Kirk & Goon, 1975), the IB program was comprised

of predominately White, suburban, and middle class students. Just as post segregation tracking enabled White families to isolate their children from the newly integrated Black student population, the IB program at WV assured that WV would retain some of its White and middle class families who otherwise would have fled to Magon. IB students seemed to have greater privileges and less stringent rules than the general student body. Also, some teachers had cultivated much different relationships with their IB students. These relationships were often so different that IB students could refer to their teacher “Bob Smith” as Mr. Bob while regular ed. students were expected to refer to him as Mr. Smith. Seated together in the middle of the cafeteria at their own tables, it was always easy to identify the IB crowd—White with a sprinkling of color here and there, colorful lunchboxes or lunch bags from home, the first to get up hurriedly and walk out when the bell rang. In essence, the IB program represented its own “school” within a school—the last “hold out” from the old WV—surrounded and protected, both physically and metaphorically, from a sea of difference. Principal Tower explains,

The way that scheduling is done, whenever you have an IB program, there's going to be a high degree of tracking because they're going to have similar classes. The way the schedule is done here, they pretty much travel together. You have them in IB Spanish 4, IB theory of knowledge—the same students. And the way we group, they pretty much walk from class to class together with little exception.

Principal Tower goes on to describe how tracking to group the IB students affects regular ed. students.

I can take you to a class right now—there's no way on earth you should put this combination of kids in that classroom unless you're trying to get rid of the

teacher—but when you track in scheduling it creates those gaps where those kids gotta go somewhere.

Because I had spent a couple weeks shadowing Tower, I understood who “those kids” were—students who were tracked into regular ed. courses which often had higher numbers of students with behavioral issues, learning disabilities, students experiencing poverty, apathetic students who were waiting to drop out, students who had become frustrated and disillusioned with school, as well as higher numbers of new or inexperienced teachers. Tracking at WV was intricately linked with race and class segregation. The whiteness and “middle classness” of IB contributed to the overall racial/cultural and class segregation at the school and emerged as an important theme in understanding the overall climate of segregation and “cliquishness” that I witnessed across the school. Principal Tower explained his feelings about how the presence of the IB program affected relationships at the school:

You have a teacher who teaches IB one block, general ed. students the next block, IB the final block and if you look on their board and around their room, everything is IB centered. You have the IB language learner profile on the wall you have all of these activities—that sends a quick message to the kids looking at it. Those are subtle little microaggressions that people don't get.

Tower's choice of the word “microaggression” was particularly insightful. Typically used to describe subtle, yet cumulative, racialized discrimination, Tower uses this word to describe differences in teacher treatment of IB and regular ed. students. At first glance, teachers may be showing preferential treatment to IB students because of students' presumed superior intellect; yet, when I considered the stark differences

between the racial demographics of the IB and regular ed. programs, there are serious race and class implications—the fact that WV’s predominately White teaching staff may give preferential treatment to students in the overwhelmingly White, middle class, IB program at the school takes on new meaning when this is contrasted with teachers’ deficit-based assumptions about the predominately people of color general ed. population.

The potential influence of the IB program on school climate and race relations at WV was an unanticipated finding. Therefore, I began to ask research participants about their impressions of IB. Many of them—predominately underclassman who had attended the school for a relatively short period of time at the start of data collection—had thought very little about differences between IB and regular ed. programs. They spoke of differences in student comportment (which I describe at length in the following data chapters), but mentioned very little about how the school and teachers perceived IB students versus regular ed. students. In contrast, Diamond, an upperclassman, former IB student had plenty to say about the differences between the programs. Diamond described, “Well it's hard to answer your questions if you've only been on one side—having been on both sides I can see—not just hearing; you actually witness it [the differences]”. During her individual interview, Diamond revealed that she had struggled to juggle the intense work expectations of the IB program in conjunction with being a cheerleader and working a part time job. Due to these difficulties, she and her mother decided that it would be best for her to remove herself from the IB program. Although she removed herself from the IB program, opting to take honors courses instead, her

thoughts and perceptions still revolved around her time in IB. Further, her social networks, primarily the students she called “Black IB” (Black students in the IB program) had not changed. Though she was technically former IB, her status as previously an IB student and ongoing association with other IB students meant that her peers continued to associate her with the IB program. As a result, throughout this dissertation, I refer to her as an IB student because of her self-perception as “still kind of IB,” her ongoing IB affiliations, and the ways that others in the YCfC seemed to perceive her. Diamond described a time when she was transitioning out of IB and due to a scheduling error, found herself in a Standard English class:

[After leaving IB] I started out in Standard English. That was an experience—three days in that class. They drew pictures, decorated their notebook. When they had to do a test—just 25 questions, read and answer. They complained like, “Oh my God, why do we have to do this?” This is the first, second day of school. We're in 11th grade. Your first, second day of school is not like elementary school—you should be prepared to work when you walk in.

Cherese: So how was IB different?

Diamond: Oh my God! Me being in IB and knowing nothing else—they talk to you about college—they don't say *if* you go to college, they say *when* you go to college. I pick up on everything and I get offended about everything. I'm not saying I'm pro-Black everything, but I catch it [slights/microaggressions]. Especially coming from a White teacher! Don't let me—cuz I can work as hard as the next. And then when I crossed over [from IB to regular ed.], it's like *if* you guys are thinking about college, *if* you want to apply for college. In IB there's a deadline.

Diamond's feelings about her IB experience were complex. On one hand, she lauded the rigor, high expectations, and better treatment that teachers give IB students. On the other hand, she was quick to differentiate between “IB” and the “Black IB” to distinguish



Black students in the program, some of whom saw themselves as distinct from other IB students. As I will discuss in a subsequent chapter, a group of the Black IB students were some of the first students who showed interest in the YCfC; however, as more general ed. students began to join, all of them but Diamond left the group. Whether due to her ability to understand “both worlds” (IB and regular ed.) or because she made a personal connection with me early on, she persisted in the YCfC when other IB students left. Also, as her comment indicates below, Diamond did not view herself as a student who was extraordinarily intelligent. Different from those who seemed to feel that IB students were a different breed, Diamond seemed to feel that anyone could be IB if they were willing to put hard work into being successful. Diamond explains:

I fall asleep in my marketing class because I'm in there with a whole bunch of freshmen that yell all the time and argue. They think it's funny and cute now, but these teachers will sit back and talk about you, like throw dirt on your name. I heard it out of a teacher's mouth. They don't give homework in standard classes because they're tired of badgering kids to turn it in. I understand they want to pass, get them through, but what's the rush to get somebody through who isn't ready. So if everybody had that. People are like, “Oh you must be smart; you were in IB.” It's not about being smart. Anybody can do anything and be IB whatever. So they short change standard students and it's robbing them of reality because when they get out, they're going to have it harder than anybody because they never had to work.

Also, Diamond's comments further illustrated that she, like Principal Tower perceived differences between teacher's high expectations of IB students and their low expectations of regular ed. students. According to Diamond, the difference in IB and regular ed. students had less to do with differences in intelligence and more to do with the fact that teachers held regular ed. students to different standards than they held IB students.

## **Analysis and Conclusions**

A discussion of the historical racial context of WV is relevant for fully deconstructing the issues of intercultural relations in the school. In this section, I argue that the school context influenced the interaction process; yet, other characteristics that the school possessed made it an optimal environment for a change project.

### **Resegregation and Perceptions of the Urban School**

The demographic shifts that have occurred at WV are not unique. For at least a decade scholars have described the trends of resegregation occurring across US schools (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Orfield & Yun, 1999). The South, which desegregated after hard fought legal battles, has been of particular interest to scholars who study resegregation because demographic changes are rapidly reversing decades of struggle to integrate southern schools (Orfield & Yun, 1999). In a multi-year study, Frankenberg and Orfield (2012) described widespread demographic shifts across the nation in which suburban schools struggled to deal with racial changes as their populations become increasingly Black and Latino/a. Researchers noted a “remarkably high level of segregation for Latino and Black students in the suburban rings around our large cities and White populations are moving to the outermost rings much faster” (p. 2). They go on to describe that research and policy have not adequately assisted school systems that are struggling to cope with the challenges of suburban resegregation (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012, p. 3). Frankenberg and Orfield argued:

Segregation has never succeeded in producing equal schools or truly viable communities on any scale. In the context of American society, separate is

unequal because of the imbalance of power and resources of many kinds across the racial lines and the deeply rooted attitudes that blame the victims of segregation for the inequalities they face. If we do not achieve integration where it is possible, we will be deepening the divisions in our society and undermining the future of many communities. (p. 217)

While many scholars acknowledge the societal inequalities that marginalize and disenfranchise communities of color, popular opinion often equates majority minority schools with negative outcomes. Rather than critique the societal inequalities that contribute to school struggles, some espouse perspectives that low-income and at risk students benefit from being seated next to more academically capable peers because of the *normative model* or *positive spillover*—the idea that the academic gains of some will transfer to others that are seated in classrooms next to them (Coleman et al., 1966; Godwin, Leland, Baxter, & Southworth, 2006). Though seemingly expressed in non-racialized terms, the ideology underlying the positive spillover idea is that problems lie within the student and their families instead of within an inequitable school and society. While the positive spillover effect is not described in racialized terms, low-income and at-risk represent codes for people of color and poor whites while academically capable is code for White or middle class. These ideas, found in contemporary writings about school reform, are strangely similar to ideas found in desegregation literature. Kirk and Goon (1975) sharply interrogated desegregation literature for putting forth ideas that people of color must be educated alongside whites to achieve equality in schooling. Kirk and Goon (1975) asserted that the premise of desegregation was built on cultural deficit theories that suggested that minority children lacked the values of White middle class

children, increased contact in schools would provide minority children with a more equitable education in which they would take on the values of their new classmates. Even after the desegregation of the nation's schools, Black students received unequal schooling from biased teachers and schools continued to foster racial segregation through tracking (Kirk & Goon, 1975). Instead of focusing on historical and systemic inequality, studies continued (and continue) to abound that focus on Black students' failure in most all measures of educational outcomes (Kirk & Goon, 1975).

Though Kirk and Goon's critique was written over 40 years ago, concepts like positive spillover continue to be discussed. Scholars countered deficit-based ideas by highlighting the social and cultural capital that children of color bring to schools (Yosso, 2005). Goldsmith (2004) states,

The true problem is not likely school integration itself, but the manner in which it has been implemented. At present, integration often creates conditions that subordinate students of color by employing many White teachers and by tracking blacks and Latinos into inferior classes. As a result, students are not being provided positive interracial experiences necessary for society to reap the full benefits of integrated schooling. (p. 610)

In considering the merits and disadvantages of integrated schools, the numbers of students of color in poverty represents a stark reminder of the historical and present day disenfranchisement of people of color. As Orfield & Yun (1999) describe,

When African-American and Latino students are segregated into schools where the majority of students are non-White, they are very likely to find themselves in schools where poverty is concentrated. This is of course not the case with segregated White students, whose majority-White schools almost always enroll high proportions of students from the middle class. This is a crucial

difference...School level poverty is related to many variables that effect a school's overall chance at successfully educating students, including parent education levels, availability of advanced courses, teachers with credentials in the subject they are teaching, instability of enrollment, dropouts, untreated health problems, lower college-going rates and many other important factors (p. 3).

Similar to studies that described the insidiousness of school tracking in the newly desegregated school (Kirk & Goon, 1975), the IB program at WV illustrates a modern day example of White/people of color segregation within a supposedly integrated school. However, with analysis of the WV context, I attempt to add depth and further complicate resegregation literature, which has yet to fully theorize race/ethnicity and class interaction between students of color who may be newly thrust together in the same school spaces.

Despite the trend toward resegregation and the well-established fact that students of color increasingly come into contact in schools, few studies describe the complexities and nuances of their interaction. In most of the intercultural relations literature, even those studies where race is directly discussed, whiteness is centered. Goldsmith (2004) theorized about schools' roles in shaping race relations using three of the prominent theories of racial interaction: homophily (birds of a feather flock together), contact theory (contact with other race peers increases acceptance of diversity), and group threat theory (competition over limited resources increases prejudice). Goldsmith concluded that tracking served to racially segregate students in integrated schools because Blacks and Latinos were overrepresented in general education classes (p. 589). He also argued that as tracking decreased both friendliness and conflict increased. Therefore, less tracking meant more heterogeneity in classes, more contact between races, and more interracial

friendships—but with this increased contact came with the potential for more conflict. Goldsmith goes on to suggest that to promote more positive relations school officials should “eliminate racial tracking programs, hire more minority teachers, promote the use of group work in class, and integrate the extracurricular” (p. 609). He also expanded on Allport’s original theory that contact was not enough to ensure racial harmony by arguing that conflict increased alongside friendliness as races come into increased contact.

The school wide data collected at WV supported, expanded, and interrogated Goldsmith’s findings on intercultural relations. When applied to the WV data, tracking may have produced a racial calming effect—or stated differently, students were kept separated in their respective class, race, and academic “homes,” resulting in less conflict, less turmoil, and a greater likelihood that the school would maintain the status quo of reproductive schooling. So extreme was the tracking at WV that many students had little idea of what school life was like in the other tracks. Be it consciously or unconsciously, students were kept ignorant of the inequitable schooling that they received in general education classrooms, which often occurred in the form of less critical instruction and rote learning. This trend found in general education classes is a pattern that has been well documented across the nation resulting in decades of inequitable schooling (Anyon, 1980). Because of being tracked and segregated, most students were simply not aware that the education they were receiving may have been different in some ways than what others received.

Though data overwhelming shows the resegregation of schools, the prevalence of predominately people of color schools, and the flight of White and middle class families

out of those schools, race relations and intercultural relations research has not come up to speed in theorizing relations in the newly resegregated schools. The rampant dismissal of the nuances of people of color identities represents a flaw in intercultural relations literature. While at times people of color must speak as one voice for political solidarity and change, this must not occur at the expense of limiting and constraining our identities. The case of WV represents a stark reminder that the presence of White and middle class students in the school does not represent a panacea for urban school problems. Although their presumed higher academic gains may mask deeper problems occurring in the school, there is a need to think deeply and critically about issues that students and teachers face in newly resegregated schools.

### **A School Identity in Flux**

Themes of looking for a school identity, the new WV, and shifting school climate/culture reoccurred frequently in interviews and observations pointing to the influx nature of the school at the time of data collection. While there were aspects of the WV context that enabled segregation, there were other qualities that made it easier for some students to resist mainstream narratives of segregation. In other words, the recent culture shifts and the search for a new school identity created an environment that may have been more conducive to creating the YCfC.

Interviews with administrators and anecdotal data collected from teachers illustrate the extreme shock that the demographic shift produced. Faculty, staff, and school leaders were confronted with questions of “Who are we?” “What are we?” “What is our school culture now?” WV, known in the city for its long standing traditions

and active alumni, was all of a sudden a school forced to start over. The new urban student body did not know or care about the things that had always been done at the school. Although the Magon community and long time faculty of WV may have characterized WV's new urbanness in a negative light, student interviews did not support this view. If anything, some students, particularly the underclassman, seemed to have little knowledge about the Old WV/New WV dichotomy. For many of the students interviewed, there was no mention of the culture shift because apparently they had no knowledge of it. For them, the school had always been a "good school" (interview with Quinten), and more importantly, some did not seem to perceive that their urbanness had changed WV's "good school" status. Perhaps, because some of them had attended other schools in Victoria (those with higher rates of gangs, violence, and fighting), WV felt friendly, calm, and uneventful in comparison. While most students interviewed admitted that gangs were an issue in the city of Victoria, none of them recognized WV as having any sort of violence or major gang issues.

WVHS's still-in-transition and school-in-transition persona produced an environment that made students more open in some ways to the YCfC project. While the goal of this project was not to compare it to the pilot study at East Reddingsdale High School (ERHS), the findings from the pilot were important in conceptualizing this project. The depth and breadth of data collection were starkly different—ERHS data collection involved interviews and a focus group with students who had graduated or left ERHS. Although I collected rich student data at ERHS, a deeply descriptive analysis of the school context was missing. As a result, I constantly felt at risk of essentializing or



painting mere fragments of an intricate picture of youth social relations. For this reason, I knew it was important to immerse myself in the culture of WV for an extended period of time to get a richer, more detailed picture of youth relations there. At ERHS, participants expressed fear, tension, or ambivalence to interracial/intercultural relations. In particular, Latino/a respondents expressed that due to gang and violence issues at ERHS, bonding with other race/ethnicity peers was potentially dangerous. In contrast, none of the YCfCers noted fear as a reason for race/ethnicity/track/class segregation at the school. Although WV was segregated, students perceived the school to be safe, open, and an easy place to make friends. This suggests that while the school continued to be segregated, there were things about the school context that made interracial/intercultural relations more palatable for students.

There were other notable differences between ERHS and WVHS that made WV a more feasible location to implement a change project. First, the school was at a turning point. In the excerpt below, Mr. Atkins described past ethnic tension and his feelings about his role as a teacher in facilitating school change:

We have gangs on our campus. It might be ethnic gangs, MC 13, Crips, Bloods, whatever you want to say. You're going to have some types of ethnic tension. Is it as pronounced as it was 4 years ago? No. Five years ago when we went through this change, what they had unwillingly and unknowingly done is they threw into this school groups that had problems in the community and when they came together, everybody was fighting over territory. The real danger in that first year was who's going to win the territory. I mean—whew! Fortunately, I think we [the school/teachers] ended up winning the territory in letting them understand that what goes on in the neighborhood doesn't have to go on here. This needs to be a safe haven from that. That largely in my opinion is kind of under the surface now. Any time you get young people of different backgrounds together that don't completely understand each other, you're going to have prejudice and

discrimination, but it's our job to overcome that. I look at that personally as one of my jobs—letting kids understand that being different is the nature of the game and that not everybody is not going to be like you and that's ok.

While Mr. Atkins did not elaborate on the specific steps that contributed to the teachers “winning the territory,” he alludes to the fact that teachers were able to successfully convince students that WV was a safe space and that there was no room for neighborhood drama. Although some of Mr. Atkins earlier comments reflected assimilationist ideas in his desire to make students more like the old WV, in this comment, he acknowledged that WV was indeed different, but felt that there was nothing inherently wrong with these differences. Yet, his comments suggested that the strong attachment to the old WV may have contributed to teachers “winning the territory”. In essence, he and others were able to convince at least some of the student body to shift their identities away from neighborhood affiliations and toward affiliation as a proud WV student. He went on to describe:

Understanding and appreciating difference is something that we need to model for our kids. They don't just see me associated with White teachers or White male teachers. They see me associating with my Hispanic coworkers, my Black coworkers. We have to put personal feelings and personal agendas behind us just like we ask the kids to do. I think that's really one of the keys in anything. A lot of people talk about prejudice, discrimination, bias—the key to overcome that is to be willing to learn from one another. The more we can do that and be open and receptive to kids of different cultures and different ideas and things of this nature, then the better we really and truly are.

Similar to Atkins' thoughts in this passage, WV had several mentors and concerned teachers who expressed a strong sentiment of “we're all in this together” and were

attempting to spread this message throughout the school. As typical in all high schools, there were student fights and behavior issues; yet, many fights, suspensions, and arrests were prevented because of adult mentors like assistant principal Tower and the security officials at the school who did more talking and mentoring than policing and surveilling. Another assistant principal at the school, Ms. Dowd, was known for telling students to step up and advocate for themselves. For Ms. Dowd, “advocate for yourself” meant students would be proactive in discussing issues with teachers, come to administrators with questions and concerns, and take a greater sense of ownership in their school. Also, similar to what he described in the passage above, I observed Mr. Atkins’ desire to build rapport with students of color, his skill at calmly mediating conflicts between students, and his openness about his love and commitment to students at the school. Perhaps his training in sociology contributed to the way in which he dealt with the change in demographics, gang conflict, and student/teacher relations at the school. As he said in the passage above, he viewed his role at WVHS as more than just a sociology teacher; he felt that he was an integral part of helping students make good choices and helping the school achieve overall success. Despite these isolated examples of adult supporters who attempted to counter the negative and deficit perspectives of other staff members, there was a pervasive sense of battle fatigue among the adults in the building, even among some of the mentors and concerned teachers. Frustration with teacher turnover, school leadership changes, large class sizes, and high-need students was pervasive among staff members. Although the demographic shift had occurred just 4 years prior to data collection, over half the staff had been replaced and there had already been numerous

changes in leadership. As the teachers braced for a new principal in the upcoming school year, there were already rumors of teachers who were contemplating resigning or transferring rather than suffering through another change in administration.

I suggest that WVHS was at a precipice—a crossroads; without intervention, the school could easily develop an environment like that of ERHS—filled with gang activity, high dropout rates, and heavily entrenched student segregation. Yet, the gains made by members of the YCfC suggest that with critical interventions that empower youth and allow different types of students to step up as leaders in the school, WV could shift from a school in transition to one that serves as a model for newly redistricted schools—one that embraces its diversity and seeks concrete strategies for encouraging cross-track, cross-racial, and cross-class interaction.

In the chapters that follow, I continue to tell the stories of WVHS. While this chapter represented a macro approach in presenting the history of the school, analyzing school structures, and relaying the perspectives of teachers at the school, in the next chapters I will delve more deeply into students' experiences and perspectives at WV. In analyzing students' experiences, I describe ways in which students' perspectives and their intersectional identities both constitute and are constituted by the overall school identity. In my depictions of WVHS, privileging the stories, voices, and thoughts of students of color at the school is paramount; therefore, in a similar vein to other school ethnographies, as I bring various voices and perspectives in concert, the stories I relay are “cumulative with the analysis building from chapter to chapter” (Garot, 2010, p. 19).

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CLIQUE AT WVHS: “IT’S NOT LIKE THOSE OLD MOVIES”**

In this project, I considered the influences of race/ethnicity, class, gender, language, and nation on student perspectives and social group choices both in the YCfC and in the school at large. Given that I am interested in student group choices I thought it important to ask about cliques. When I did, Diamond, a YCfCer, told me “It’s not like what you’re thinking—like one of those old movies that had the jocks and the geeks—things are different now.” Although as she continued talking she seemingly contradicted this statement by outlining all the various groups in the school, including the “sneaker crew” “the loud and ratchet girls” and “the Black IB,” I was particularly interested in exploring what was different—what were the nuances of students’ social group choices and how might these nuances point to their perspectives on intersectional identities and intercultural relations? Although previous literature has described youth identity formation (Best, 2007; Erikson, 1950) and youth relations (Quillian & Campbell, 2003), to my knowledge few if any studies have explored intersectional youth identities in relation to intercultural/interracial relations. Understanding how students perceived themselves in relation to their peers was important to better understand the context in which YCfCers interacted on a daily basis in addition to analyzing the effectiveness of a change project that addressed intercultural/interracial relations at the school.

Data collected from YCfC members confirmed many of my initial observations that students at the school seemed to be segregating themselves racially/culturally. Yet, more importantly, data from YCfC members helped to complicate and challenge my observations by showing a more intersectional and nuanced picture of historical, social, institutional, and situational influences on interracial/intercultural contact. I found that there were structures of oppression that existed at WV that enabled segregation; yet there were students who expressed their agency by resisting these mainstream norms. In the pages that follow, I illustrate the ways in which students segregated themselves by race, track, and interest; describe students who resisted the dominant tendency to segregate; and discuss YCfCers' perspectives on identity and intercultural/interracial relations. Finally, I draw conclusions about how an analysis of social groups at WVHS counters essentialized notions of youth identities and fosters a more complex and nuanced look at youth of color intersectional identities.

### **School-wide Cliques by Race**

In addition to working with the YCfC, I spent many hours at WVHS tutoring, observing, conversing with students, and asking questions. From observations of hallways, the cafeteria, clubs, and classrooms, the vast majority of WVHS students seemingly segregated themselves by race/culture<sup>6</sup>. Yet in keeping with my theoretical lenses of multiplicity and youth perspectives, I sought to ascertain students' perspectives on the issue. When I began telling students what I was studying, "interaction between

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term race/culture throughout the dissertation to reflect the fluid ways that these terms interact.

students of color”, they typically asked, “what kind of interaction?” Then, I would specify that I meant interaction like “relationships” between students of color to which one student responded, “Oh you mean people who get together and have mixed babies. I just love that.” So I eventually modified the way in which I described the study to make it easier for students to understand what I was asking. During student interviews I typically used the word “clique” to ask about student interaction because this seemed to be the term that was most widely understood.

In response to the question of “What groups or cliques do you see here at WVHS?” students responded in a variety of ways. Quinten, responded, “They hang out with people that are just like them,” When I asked him to be more specific he responded, “Latinos hang out with mostly Latinos. Black people hang out with mostly Black people; then there are some groups that’s just mixed.” Similarly Jayanna stated, “It’s like—two tables. It’s like mostly White people in that one area; then you have the like Hispanics in one section.” Marco responded in the same way: “Yeah, like by race—like separate tables. It depends on who they talk to. Some don’t like others so they don’t talk [to each other].” When I asked him who he typically sat with at lunch, he responded:

Latinos. Actually it depends because today me and my friends will probably sit with the White people and tomorrow I’ll sit with Latino/as—it’s different depending on if it’s A day or B day.

Marco’s comment leads further credence to the idea that interaction is influenced by school structures. WVHS followed an A day/B day schedule meaning that a student’s 3<sup>rd</sup> period class on “A” day could be Biology while their “B” day class might be Spanish.

Their schedules typically consisted of a mixture of semester and yearlong classes.

Semester classes were those that students attended every day; yearlong classes were the ones they went to every other day (A day/B day). This meant that if a student had a yearlong class during the 3<sup>rd</sup> period lunch block, they could potentially be at lunch with a different crowd of students every other day, while students with semester classes during 3<sup>rd</sup> period would go to lunch with the same class each day. Marco's statement, "Me and my friends might sit with the White people" does not necessary imply that interracial interaction was occurring—he refers to them as "White people" not as "friends," by their individual names, or even as "my White friends." This perhaps suggested a relationship of convenience or the fact that even though Marco and his Latino friends were seated with White students very other day, there may not have been any real, meaningful interaction occurring. Santiago, a YCfCer who had attended neighboring high schools before coming to WVHS noted,

There [his last high school] it really didn't matter. Everybody hangs out no matter the race; I feel like here it's more segregated. Over there I seen all my friends in the cafeteria—a small space we all gathered there, different races—here it's like the table and you see mostly Hispanics.

When I prompted him to try to explain what he thought caused the difference between how students interacted from school to school, he responded:

It's just different kids. Maybe it's different because something happened in the past. Something like friends does something bad and especially if they're from a different race—like a Hispanic guy goes to an African American and they do something bad, they're gonna hate all the people from that race.



Although I thought that perhaps he was referring to a past skirmish between a few Black and Latino/a students that Assistant Principal Tower had mentioned in this interview, Santiago had not heard about any specific racial conflicts and said he was just speaking in general. Yet, Santiago's opinions were interesting in their overall connection with other findings—namely that students were not inherently opposed to intercultural/interracial interaction and that there were perhaps social, contextual, and historical situations that fostered stereotyping and misperceptions about peers who were different. When I asked Marco about his perceptions of the interaction of students at the school Marco responded, “It depends on the person—cuz me personally, I’m cool with everybody. I’m cool with other races.” When I prompted him to explain why some people were not as “cool” with other races, he replied,

Like for a Black person— if you talk Spanish, sometimes some of them get kind of like offended or mad because they don’t know what you’re saying and they think you’re saying something about them and they get mad. And some people say, ‘We’re in America, talk English’. That makes me mad cuz I was raised to speak both languages so I have to like keep that going and speak my language— like because I speak English as my first language, my second language is Spanish, and I have to keep practicing both languages because if I don’t speak Spanish, I’m gonna forget it.

Marco's comments suggested another rationale for Latino/a segregation at the school—the importance of maintaining first language fluency. The importance of maintaining first language represented a prominent theme in data analysis. The study design required students to meet in the YCfC during the enrichment block; therefore, many of the recently immigrated students, primarily Burmese and Latino/a who struggled

academically because of their difficulty with English, were required to receive ESL language instruction, retake tests, or catch up on homework/missing assignments during enrichment. Many of them were unable to attend YCfC meetings; therefore, most of the students in the YCfC, with the exception of one, were born in the United States, had been in the US since early grades and were either fully bilingual or English dominant.

Although the study in question focused on intercultural/interracial relations among students of color, White students were frequently mentioned in YCfC meetings as well as interviews. As one student noted about midway through the year, “Has anyone noticed there aren’t any White people in our group?” During another interview, when I asked a student how we could improve our group, he asked, “Don’t you think we need some White students in the group? It’s just Blacks and Hispanics right now.” Similar to the pilot study, Whiteness was ever present in the data, despite the fact that students operated in primarily student of color spaces. When I asked students about White students at the school, most of them immediately mentioned the IB students.

Cherese: What about the White students here?

Kaila: Those are like AP/IB students.

Cherese: Are the White students that you sit with IB?

Marco: Yeah I think they are

Diamond: When it comes to other races, you have IB whites, then you have whites that still talk to the IB whites, then you have IB whites who are athletes but they don't sit in public with the other athletes because they are with their White

friends, and then the White divide is really not that large—they're really in there with each other

Although there were White students outside of the IB program and there were students of color within the IB program, the largest concentration of White students at the school were in the IB program, perhaps leading students to automatically conflate the two terms: White and IB. Diamond, the former IB student, was the only student interviewee who acknowledged that there were Whites who were not in IB (Diamond: then you have Whites that still talk to the IB Whites). For most students interviewed, they perceived that being White at WVHS was synonymous with being IB. However, Principal Tower described another population of general ed. White students who none of the interviewees specifically mentioned:

We have our thugs, and I also mean White too. They more so identify with the Black students who identify themselves as thugs here at the school. So they're more comfortable. They've been pretty much ostracized from the general White population so they attach themselves to people that accept them.

Mr. Tower's mention of the "White thugs" was interesting, particularly in light of the fact that none of the student interviewees mentioned this particular segment of the population. Throughout the year, occasionally White students attended meetings. Although the intended participants in the YCfC were students of color, it was my policy not to turn any students away and to encourage anyone to participate who was interested. Most inadvertently signed up for the group or were signed up by an administrator, seemed uncomfortable during the time they were there, and did not return. However, one White

student, Taylor, came to the YCfC, got along well with other YCfC members, and returned several times. Although Principal Tower didn't provide a description of the "White thug" group of students, Taylor's expressions and behaviors may have aligned her with this group. Well-known for fighting and skipping school, Taylor spoke with an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and hung out with Black students at the school. On her first day with the group, I asked her what she enjoyed doing for fun. She responded that she liked to "party, drink, and smoke weed." Soon after, Taylor was involved in an altercation with another student, was given long term suspension, and to my knowledge did not return to WV.

Throughout the data collection process, I spent many hours tutoring and observing in the English as a Second Language classes where I met some of the Burmese and Vietnamese students at the school. During school-wide observations, I saw these students with various groups—Latinos from their ESL class, Black students they knew from other classes, and other Asian students who were siblings, cousins, or friends. Therefore, I found it surprising that few of the interviewees mentioned the Asian population at the school. When interviewees did mention Asian students, they mentioned the Asians in the IB program. For example, in describing the various racial cliques at the school, Diamond replied:

They're almost like cliques inside of cliques. Like the first division is race--like not saying that this is a segregated school and people don't speak to each other but people differ and divide to people who look like them...the Asians are so small [in number]; they're with the White people. And then Hispanics, they're some IB Hispanics. They sit with each other and they also sit with the White IBs. The Hispanics that aren't in IB, they just sit with each other.

Diamond, who identified as Black, stated that she had only interacted with mostly Black and some White students at the school. She described at length the variations in the “Black groups” (discussed in the next section), fewer variations in the White student groups (the quote in the previous paragraph), and no variation in the Latino/a and Asian groups. Diamond was not the only interviewee that glossed over groups other than Blacks, Whites, and Latino/as. For example, when I pointedly asked about the Asian students at the school, Principal Tower replied:

No they're not a lot and many of them have assimilated into whatever program they're in. I know some and they're in the IB program and that's where they live. I hate to say it this way but they fall into being White as model minorities you know.

Neither Principal Tower, Diamond, nor any of the other interviewees mentioned the Asian students that I interacted with in the ESL program. Their opinions were shockingly similar to research that argued that the “model minority myth” works to silence and gloss over racial/cultural, linguistic, and social concerns faced by Asian youth, particularly Southeast Asian youth (Lee, 2015). As scholars of Asian students have argued, often administrators and teachers assume that the Asian population is not a concern because of a few prominent, high-achieving Asian students in the school.

Students’ identification of race as a significant factor in their social groups was not a surprise finding. Before choosing the research site, I had spoken to both an administrator and a teacher colleague who had mentioned the segregation that existed at the school. Further, even before I received approval to conduct a study at WVHS, I had

been told about a small skirmish that had occurred the previous year between a few Black and Latino/a students at the school. Principal Tower stated,

We had a situation two years ago with Black students literally trying to fight Mexican students and it was the weirdest standoff ever. Black students were scared to death--they were rowdy and showboating to get our attention to come break it up and our Hispanic students were just standing there like 'come on what you gon do?' So I jumped in and another teacher jumped in and we separated them. The other teacher and me sat down, everybody across the table, mediated it, talked about it. Something had happened in the community. We haven't had that problem pop back up again since.

Principal Tower did not have details about what had happened in the community and none of the student interviewees had heard about this. From Principal Tower's perspective the skirmish had been an isolated incident and students did not seem truly invested in continuing the conflict. He described that while they were initially very upset, the conflict quickly fizzled. While this occurred before I began the study, data collected was consistent with this incident. Students were segregated and may have lacked an understanding of each other's cultural experiences, but there seemed to be very few instances of anger, tension, and conflict between racial/cultural groups. As Isabella and Santiago mention in the next section, even in their experiences with gang affiliated students, the few at WV as well as others at previous schools, gang conflict was rarely interracial. Instead, it was more likely that Latino/a rival gangs fought each other and Black rival gangs fought each other. As I described in the previous chapter, racial segregation may have had a racial calming effect. Even though students of color shared the same schools and neighborhoods, their tendency to navigate in different worlds

perhaps worked to *prevent* frequent interracial conflict. Interracial conflict has been well documented in Northeast and Western cities where people of color populations have interacted for generations (i.e. New York and California); however, the body of research on race relations in southern cities like Victoria is relatively new. Therefore, this analysis of youth interracial/intercultural relations at WV offers timely and critical data. As cities in the Southeast become increasingly diverse, it becomes increasingly important to highlight spaces in which students are not simply coexisting in the same spaces, but have found innovative ways to interact through difference and navigate potential conflicts that arise.

### **Cliques by Track and Interest**

Although discussions of race/culture were inextricably linked to all discussions of student cliques, some interviewees seemed to feel that other categories were more salient in determining students' social group choices. These included interests (athletics, music, etc.), neighborhood, gang affiliations, school track, and social acceptability (popular, outcast etc.). Although in the sections below, I attempt to discuss these categories in isolation, this is only for the purpose of description and clarity. It is important to note that as students described each of these groups, the borders and boundaries between each were extremely fuzzy and blurred. Many were quick to point out that these groups weren't definitive. In fact, though student interviewees identified WVHS's social groups with ease, most of them struggled to identify in which group they would place themselves, stating either "I'm not in any group" or "I'm just in the regular people

group.” While naming and categorizing others was fairly easy, they were much more reticent about naming themselves and their own social groups.

### **Neighborhoods and Gangs**

While most interviewees identified race/culture as a significant factor in determining student social groups, some disagreed expressing that groups were dependent on neighborhood affiliations. For example, Kaila was one of the few YCfCers who had a diverse group prior to data collection. Though she routinely expressed her love for diversity, her disparaging remarks about immigrants produced some of our most heated debates. When I asked her about cliques at the school, she replied:

Kaila: It's not really based on race like that. It's really based on who you grew up or who you became friends with over the years or who came to middle school with you and is still your friend. Some of these cliques are based on drama and on not liking people. I'm friendly with everybody; I'm a happy person. I make friends easily.

Cherese: So they're not so much based on race?

Kaila: No.

Cherese: I think I've heard you talk about the Latino/a groups. Are they a clique?

Kaila: Oh gosh! They can stay with their group. They stay with the people they're comfortable around—people that speak Spanish—like they stay with them. They technically have their own clique. But it's some Hispanics that act Black—act Black not Black, but you know, they act Black

Cherese: The ones you're friends with, are they like the ones who act Black?

Kaila: No they're not. They act like who they are. The same way I met them is the same way they're going to stay.



Despite her stated desire to love everybody, Kaila seemed to express disdain both with students who only spoke Spanish (Kaila: Oh gosh! They can stay with their group) and with those Spanish speakers who “act Black.” Kaila had close friends at WV who she identified as Latino/a, and I observed her with these students on several occasions during lunch. When I asked her about their ethnicity, she described one as a Puerto Rican male and the other 2 as Asian females. To my knowledge they were native/proficient English speakers and according to Kaila, she and her friends did not talk about “race stuff.” In her comment above, she makes a sharp distinction between her friends, who “act like who they are” and other Latino/as who “act Black”. It is unclear what Kaila considers “acting Black,” but Kaila’s comments were often ambiguous and contradictory; yet, she had a strong desire to make friends with everyone. Although she seemed to gravitate toward multicultural groups of students, she spent much of the fall semester dealing with her misconceptions about Latino/as and immigrants. In the next data chapter, I describe Kaila’s anti-immigrant comments and their influence on other YCfCers.

While most interviewees shared similar understandings of the word clique, there were a couple of students who interpreted the word “clique” to be synonymous with “gang”. Throughout the project, I was particularly interested in noting the presence or absence of gangs at WV because of the relationship between gang activity and intercultural/interracial relations found in the pilot study. Overwhelmingly students in the pilot study at RHS cited gangs as a barrier to interacting with different cultures/races of people. Not only was it taboo, but it could also be dangerous to be seen trying to interact with students who were possibly affiliated with a different gang, particularly

outside of safe spaces such as classrooms. WV, though it was demographically similar to the pilot school, seemed to have fewer problems with gangs.

Cherese: What kind of cliques do you see here?

Cameron: Like gangs

Cherese: There are gangs here?

Cameron: Yeah

Cherese: Like real gangs or like fake?

Cameron: For real—not like Crip and Blood—if it was like that the school would have been shut down; like neighborhood gangs

Cherese: So people hang by neighborhood?

Cameron: Yeah

After gangs were mentioned in the first few interviews, in subsequent interviews, I began asking students about the presence of gangs in the school. Questions about gang activity also uncovered deficit beliefs about the differing reputations of Victoria schools as well as the ways students associated gangs with school safety and the socioeconomic status of students at the school.

Cherese: In general you would say it's (gangs) not much of an issue here?

Quinten: Not much. South Victoria was different though. It's really bad there.

Cherese: It has a lot of gangs? Why do you think there's more there than here?

Quinten: Well, cuz they're a Title I school.

Cherese: What's that mean?

Quinten: I think it means like basically easier to get into. Like the kids that do bad stuff and come to schools like WV and get kicked out from here—then they would go somewhere like South Victoria.

By definition, schools are designated as Title I because they serve large percentages of disadvantaged students and as a result receive additional government funding. Ironically, WVHS has a Free and Reduced Lunch percentage (FRL) of 61%; only 10% less than the FRL of 71% at South Victoria; yet Quinten stated that his mother transferred him to WV because she believed it was a good school where he would get a good education. It was not surprising that Quinten named South Victoria's Title 1 status as the reason for its gang activity. Quinten's definition of a Title I school reflected dominant, mainstream thought about schools that serve some of the most disenfranchised students—that students at Title 1 are delinquent, that the education they receive is subpar, and that the school's problems, including gang involvement, occur as a result of students' negative behaviors instead of as a result of poverty, deficit ideology, or inequitable school redistricting. Though WV's FRL of 61% meant that over half of their population was classified as economically disadvantaged, Quinten's perception did not reflect the same deficit beliefs that he ascribed to South Victoria.

While some students and faculty members mentioned the presence of minor gang activity, gangs were never cited as connected to safety concerns or perceived as obstacles to interacting across difference. Assistant Principal Tower stated:

There has been some gang activity but not a huge thing, you know--where people are flagging and representing those known gangs like MS 13 [marasalvatrucha] and Surs [Sur 13], and Bloods and Crips. We don't have that. It's neighborhoods

who decide, we gonna call ourselves whatever and we've [administration] pretty much been able to isolate and shut them down. If you go to their neighborhoods, these are front yard, backyard gangs. You're a gang with a gazebo in your yard? They're neighborhood friends who hang out together but they make the mistake of giving themselves a name and a secret handshake and stuff like that and that gives them the title of gang.

Isabella, a YCfC member also mentioned gangs in her interview:

Most of the times when they [gangs] fight it's race against race. Their own race, but you don't really see that here. I think it's sort of a good thing. Most of the problems I've seen have been with Hispanics and Hispanics—like with gang fights. Salvadorians and Mexicans are trying to be gangsters but not many here at this school are real ones.

Isabella was one of the YCfCers who had attended other schools prior to coming to WV.

Her comment illustrated that while she witnessed gang issues at other schools, gangs were not serious at WV. Also, Isabella's commentary touched on two themes that were reoccurring in both the WV and RH (pilot school) studies. First, Isabella, like Principal Tower, distinguished different types of gang affiliated students. She perceived that students at WV who claimed gang affiliation were distinct from real gangsters she had seen at previous schools. Second, she highlighted the fact that in her experiences, gang conflict occurred more frequently between gangs of the same race/ethnicity group. In another interview, Santiago admitted he had been involved in gangs before. In response to my questions about being pulled back into gang activity at WV, Santiago responded, "I don't even worry about that. I haven't seen that here." While he noted that there was some gang activity at WVHS, he said, "The kids keep it low. They don't wanna say they're from the gang." Santiago spoke at length about gang issues at the high school in

Victoria that he had attended the previous school year. The two most powerful gangs there were “Sur 13”—a Mexican American gang first popularized in California, but which later spread throughout the nation, and another was “The Aces<sup>7</sup>”—a predominately Black gang native to Victoria that had achieved national notoriety for its violence and criminal activity. Santiago responded that, “there were others (gangs) that were too scared to show it.” Santiago described that his struggle with drugs, which was precipitated by his gang involvement, began in middle school—all because of assumptions people made about his cultural affiliation and his desire to help a friend:

I had some bad experiences. Something I regret. That's partially why I moved to WVHS. I got caught with drugs. I was selling them. They just suspended me. I gave it up and it wasn't that much. I had a lighter with me so they didn't charge me. When I came here, I stopped using—[Before coming to WV] I was using and selling. Everything changed when I moved with my dad.

Cherese: When did you get involved with drugs?

Santiago: It all happened because I met someone [in middle school] and he was like, ‘I’m bout to get jumped by a whole bunch of people’ and I was like ‘stop doing that’ [to the guys who were threatening him]. And they just kept picking on us and the next thing you know more people added. Soon as we [our group] got bigger they stopped talking to us, but then since we all Salvadorian, you know, the two rivals Sur 13 and MS...well they thought we were MS and that's when everything started.

For Santiago, his gang activity led him to sell drugs which led to drug use—all before he even came to high school. Although he was simply helping a friend who was being bullied, as his social group grew larger, the fact that all of his friends happened to be

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<sup>7</sup> Pseudonym

from El Salvador, where the MS (marasalvatrucha) gang began, automatically pitted him against students at the school who were Mexican and associated with the gang Sur 13. From my experiences with middle school gangs, it's difficult to say how legitimate these gangs were, but the association was enough to pull Santiago into a lifestyle of using and selling drugs. For him, WVHS was a way to make a fresh start. He, like other YCfCers who had experienced past brushes with the law, was cautious about who he chose to be around. Santiago had one or two close friends at school (two Mexican males), and was extremely careful who he befriended, so as not to get involved with the kind of trouble that he had been immersed in before. Santiago noted the segregation at the school, yet when I asked him if he only hung out with Salvadorians at WVHS he responded,

I hang out with every type, like me, it don't matter where you from, what race you are, you talk to me, I'll talk to you.

Cherese: What makes you different like that?

Santiago: It just causes tension. If Salvadorians say they don't like some Mexicans, it's just gonna cause problems for everyone because everybody's gonna think all Salvadorians think like that. I try to get along with everybody.

Although Santiago's main social group was Latino, he was one of the first YCfCers to begin interacting with Black students in the group. During the interview, Santiago remarked, "Most of my life I hung out with Hispanic kids. Here at WVHS, sometimes I'm with different races." Taking into account that he was gang involved before he came to WVHS, his words add further credence to the argument that the presence of gangs in urban predominately minority schools, foster segregation (and less conflict by default)

because of fear of interacting, as well as hinder the likelihood that students will attempt to interact with racial/cultural others.

### **Tracking**

As I began to describe in the *Suburban to Urban* chapter, the structures of the school, namely tracking, worked to isolate and segregate particular groups of students into academic cliques. While tracking was salient in the interview of Principal Tower, rarely was there any mention of this in student interviews. The one exception to this was Diamond who was previously an IB student, but had since come out of the program and was taking a mixture of general ed. classes. In describing the lack of interaction between students in the IB program and the general ed. classes, she described:

It's not like, let's go over there and talk [talk to students in other tracks]. Because they don't speak to each other. It's almost like we don't divide ourselves on purpose but it's like a domino effect. Students test or score this high and they're automatically in certain classes.

Diamond's comment provides insight about the preeminence of testing in schools. Her comment illustrates that students are in IB because they tested in and by default were identified as gifted. Many were likely identified as early as 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and as a result have been tracked into academically challenging courses throughout elementary, middle, and now high school. According to Diamond, students don't divide themselves on purpose, but are thrust into segregated settings because of the system in which they are being educated. While at first glance, testing simply segregates students according to their supposed ability to perform academically challenging work, a deeper analysis shows that

tracking has strong race and social class implications. Though there are exceptions, race and class inequality perpetuates itself and continues generation after generation through systems like tracking. White and middle class families possess resources and connections to ensure that their children are tracked into the programs where they will receive the best education.

In observations of the WV cafeteria, within a sea of Black and brown faces, there were usually several tables around the middle of the cafeteria that were predominately White, with a sprinkling of Black and Asian students mixed in. These students seemed to behave differently than other students at the school and I never saw many of them outside of the cafeteria. When I inquired as to which groups of students sat at those tables, I was told that they were primarily the IB students. I noticed that many of the IB students dressed differently than the general ed. students, ate lunches brought from home, spoke Standard English, and proceeded directly and quickly to class at the sound of the bell. These IB/general ed. distinctions became especially pronounced in the YCfC when IB and general ed. students came together to try to work together on collaborative projects. During the initial YCfC meetings, dynamics between the Black girls described by Diamond as “loud and ratchet” and the IB Black girls were tense and strained—so much so that most of the IB girls refused to return to the group. In the next data chapter, I describe at length the interaction that occurred between IB and regular ed. girls in the group.



The presence of an IB program at WV influenced school-wide scheduling. When asked about the interaction of students of color at the school, Principal Tower raised the issue of how class scheduling works to isolate and separate students:

Cherese: I'm wondering how you would describe the interaction between students of color here at the school—comparing Black students, Latino students, Asian students—I've seen some others also. I met a Lebanese student today.

Tower: I think it's more class [social class] and ethnicity. For example, our students in our IB program even though they may be of mixed races [Whites, Blacks, Asians] you know they will probably get along a lot better. Our students who are in general ed., they tend to be a little more isolated [racially]. So they're socially isolated by the nature of their track and then, through that, they become racially isolated as well. So there are some examples of folks mingling, but for the most part there's still some isolation. Black students with Black students and Hispanics with their groups and stuff like that.

Tower's statement shows his belief that there are both race/ethnicity and social class differences (Tower: I think it's more class and ethnicity) between IB and general ed. students that are exacerbated by tracking at the school. I was unable to gain access to the FRL percentages of students in the IB program—to my knowledge, these numbers had not been disaggregated from the whole school FRL numbers. Yet, if data at WV follows statewide and nationwide trends in regards to the racialization of poverty in public schools, the predominately White IB program likely had students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds than those in general ed. (Perna et al., 2013). Tower does not expand upon his comment that students in general ed. are socially and racially isolated. But, I infer that he suggests that regular ed. students are primarily Black and Latino from similar socioeconomic backgrounds that are isolated from middle class,

White, and Asian populations at the school who are tracked into IB courses. Also, when he describes that IB students “probably get along a lot better,” I infer that this could have been as a result of several factors. In general IB students were well-versed at playing the “school game” and worked very hard to be successful in the academically rigorous program. Therefore, there may have been fewer obvious social conflicts between students due to the focus on academics and students’ desire for “acceptable” classroom behavior. YCfCers said little about differences in academic tracks; yet, they did describe differences in student behaviors. In the next section, I describe how YCfCers described their peers’ behavioral differences in social and classroom spaces within the school.

### **Behavior and Respectability**

Although some YCfCers believed that students initially divide themselves by race, many of the African American interviewees described specific variations in cliques within the African American community of students based on differences in interests and behaviors.

Diamond: In the African American group, you have sneaker heads; then you have your athletes that talk to sneaker heads but are still like ‘oh I’m trying to get into football’. Most of them are strictly about shoes—like they come to school to get shoes or to trade shoes. Then when it comes to females, you have some females—mostly cheerleaders, then your track runners, your dance team, then you have some girls who don’t do anything and those are the girls that like to argue and fight or be loud and ratchet. I call them girls that don’t have “nothing to lose.”

Shawn, one of the YCfCers that Diamond would probably characterize as a “loud and ratchet” girls, identified similar groups during her interview. For her, there was a “ghetto

clique”, a “Spanish clique”, and the “quiet kids” because “kids match up by how they act”. When I asked her which group she usually associated with, she responded, “I be with everybody to be honest. Like today, I was with the quiet kids because I didn’t have time for that [drama].” Both Shawn and Diamond lump non-Black youth into a racial category and fail to distinguish any differences or nuances in non-Black social groups at WV. In contrast, they viewed several subtle differences in Black social groups, including the distinction between “athletes” and “sneaker heads,” wherein the latter are primarily interested in athletics as it relates to buying, selling, and trading sneakers. While Diamond and Shawn were not a part of all of the groups they described, the predominately Black cultural groups were more salient to them because of their racial similarity. Similarly, their unfamiliarity with the nonblack people of color groups reflected their lack of awareness and exposure to students in Latino/a, Asian, or mixed race social groups.

The idea of the “loud and ratchet girl” or the girls that “don’t have nothing to lose,” mentioned in the quote by Diamond, was a recurring theme in students’ descriptions of school cliques and YCfC behavior in general. Diamond distinguished “loud and ratchet girls” from the girls who are involved in activities such as cheering, track, and dance. From the perspective of a gendered theoretical lens, the frequent connection of IB girls and girls who were involved in school activities as acceptable, and the “ratchet girls” as unacceptable is reminiscent of E. Frances White’s (2010) description of the “politics of respectability” and her argument about “attack[ing] the ideology behind the good woman/bad woman dichotomy” (p. 35). White critiqued Black

feminist scholars for glossing over class differences in efforts to promote solidarity between Black women, thus silencing the voices of poor Black women. At WV, the idea of the “ratchet girl,” to my knowledge, was rarely applied to girls with race, class, or track privilege. Instead it was a term reserved for the presumed angry, loud, Black girls, and certain Latina girls, who were deemed to have unacceptable behaviors by certain teachers, administrators, and higher class/track students—those girls who just came to school and went home, without being involved in any school activities, and engaged in fighting, cursing, and “drama” in the hall and in class. However, while Diamond, and certain teachers and administrators frequently mentioned the “loud and ratchet girl,” Jayanna and Ariana complicated this picture in describing who was considered “popular” at WV. For them, “popularity” seemed to be linked to material possessions (for boys and girls) and sexual behaviors (for girls).

Jayanna: Sometimes it’s the way people dress I guess. Like their clothes, their shoes, most of the people who can dress and on top of that they have shoe game—it’s mostly them that are in the popular group.

Ariana: hmmm. By popularity, how they dress, the shoe game. For the girls, the girls that like to pass their body and stuff [girls seen as promiscuous].

Cherese: So you mentioned the popularity group. Who’s in there?

Ariana: It’s Black and White—barely any Hispanics

Ariana, who artfully performed various personas (depending on the context in which she found herself), including “loud and ratchet” Latina, described “girls who like to pass their body and stuff” as a part of the popular group, though she perceived that there were very

few Latinas in that group. It is important to note that she doesn't make a value judgement about these girls, only states her perception that they were popular because of their promiscuity. Latino/as were in the minority at the school and many Latino/a participants expressed that most of them got along because they were few in numbers at the school. Perhaps some, like Ariana, found it difficult to find a space where she fit. She was perhaps "too Black" for some of her Latino friends because of her ability to code switch and perhaps "too Spanish" for some of her Black friends. In a school environment with more Latinos, it would perhaps been easier for Ariana to find her group without having to deny any particular parts of her identity or cultural expression.

While Latino students didn't mention divisions between them, there were rumors and murmurings of divisions between certain families that could have been social class, ethnicity, or religion related. Certain families were described as "traditional and strict," mostly with their daughters, who they gave strict rules about where they could go and who they could be around. There were stories of parents who had strong aspirations for their children to achieve the American dream and go to college and felt that some of their children's friends were interfering with this. There were stories of parents who perceived Latinas as having a bad influence and had called the school to request that teachers keep their daughters away from them. Notably, the girls they could not be around were those Latinas from broken homes, those who were living with uncles, cousins, or extended family because of the trauma of immigration, those who dated boys, or those who had excessive freedom to post pictures on social media. Two of the girls in particular that were mentioned wore heavy makeup, were popular with the boys, were rumored to have

pictures of themselves in bikinis on Facebook, and lived with extended family because their mother was deceased.

In students' description of cliques, while race, gender, track, and even sexuality were mentioned, social class remained relatively invisible and unnamed. While in some contexts, popularity and "dress" might be equated with higher social classes, YCfCers simply identified popular students as those who could "dress" and had "shoe game." Though it might be implied that popular students were of a particular social class because of their abilities to afford the latest fashions, WV data was not necessarily consistent with this idea. As I mentioned before, with a few exceptions such as the "Black IB," IB students were often coded as "White" and distinguished as a separate clique from other groups described as "popular," "athletes," or "sneakerheads." Although we can assume that the IB population may have had higher numbers of middle class students, interviewees did not necessarily equate IB students with "popularity," "dress," and "shoe game". With the exception of Ariana, who perceived that the popular kids were Black and White, but not Hispanic, Black interviewees did not seem to perceive the popular kids as being White or IB.

From the perspective of a teacher/administrator, Tower described the following cliques at WV:

This is going to sound really bad. Of course, I have my lil thug crew, you know, they pretty much came here and they're your alpha males—but your alpha males from poverty. So they have a tradition of checking out of school. They're the ones that are carrying their parents' scars from school. They're here to have fun. And I have my angry girls, the thug girls too. They're just ready to pop off at any time. In fact, that's all they're here for—the drama you know. I call them 'angry

girls' or soon to be 'ugly girls' cuz you can't walk around frowning like this all the time—they're some girls I go to every day and I say 'smile.' Of course we have our athletes and those are some of your alpha males, alpha females, but they have an outlet because they have that talent or at least they're willing to work on that talent. IB students have their own kind of group and even inside of the IB program there are in-groups and out-groups of IB. They're some kids who aren't considered 'real IB' [not considered smart enough to be in IB] and some who are. And of course you have your glamour girls, you know. And they're trying to grow up too fast. They try to dress like the images they see on TV. It's unfortunate too because you try to advise them on if you got it from the neck up, you don't have to dress it up from the neck down—if you got it inside, you don't have to show it off on the outside. It's hard for them to see that point, you know.

While he doesn't use the same terminology, Tower also refers to the "loud and ratchet girls" in his descriptions of student groups at WV. Tower's commentary on student social groups points to numerous race and gender issues that adults at WV confronted in working with youth. Perhaps because of his stated interest in promoting Black male achievement, Tower took a special interest in the Black male students at the school. He acknowledged that their thug behavior was perhaps a result of their environment, parental attitudes about school, or their "alpha maleness" that ran counter to the submissiveness and obedience expected of them by their teachers at school. In describing girls at the school, themes of the "politics of respectability" emerged in descriptions of acceptable and unacceptable female behavior. Tower's commentary on the "angry" girls pulls from gendered cultural scripts that place "loud Black girls" at the bottom of the ladder of social desirability. The suggestion that they should "smile and not look so angry" implied that they should change their demeanor to try to be more socially desirable. While the explanation of the male "thugs" is more nuanced and contextual—they are carrying their "parents' scars"—the female counterparts to the male "thugs" are described as angry and

ugly, without any of the contextual explanation and benefit of the doubt given to the boys. The underlying suggestion is that the “angry girls” express their gender in softer, more feminine ways by smiling. The “hard face” or “mean mug,” acceptable for young Black males in showing their toughness and prowess is somehow unacceptable when translated to the female body. In contrast to the “loud Black girls” are the “glamour girls” whose dress and behaviors border on being too sexualized. When Tower mentions that if these girls realized that they “have it” mentally, then they wouldn’t have to show the “physical”, he firmly distinguishes them from the IB girls who we can assume already “have it” mentally.

Although both the “loud Black girl” as well as the “glamour girl” personas reflect a common theme of adult and societal policing of the bodies (and sexualities) of teenage girls, there is still a hierarchical relationship set up between the two. Similar to the “male thugs”, who presumably have a reason for their resistance to the norms of schools, the “glamour girls” also have a reason for their oversexualized behaviors—they have been negatively influenced by media and their desire to “grow up too fast.” In contrast, Tower gives no explanation for the behavior of the “angry girl” and the “thug girl.” Apparently, she is angry for no reason and comes to school simply to create “drama” (problems). Her behavior transgresses the norms of femininity and she unlike her male “thug” counterpart seemingly has no reason to be angry. Although I did not prompt Tower to give examples of students he would place in these groups, I shadowed him long enough to have witnessed many of the students he mentored on a daily basis. One in particular, Shawn, a YCfCer, (see YCfC core group narratives for a description) performed the “angry, thug



girl” persona on a daily basis. I use the word “performed” because after having worked with her in the YCfC, I would argue that after earning her respect, I rarely saw the “angry” part of her personality. Yet, in her daily interaction with adults at the school, she was often loud and abrasive, particularly if she felt she was being treated unfairly. Shawn identified as female (though her girlfriend, Regena, jokingly told her that she was a boy), and her dress was typical of boys at WV (jeans with the “drop crotch” or “sag,” jerseys, and sneakers). The combination of her combative behavior, dress, and sexuality likely placed her in both the “angry thug girl” and “loud and ratchet” group. While I never had a conversation with Principal Tower about how he would classify Shawn within his perception of the school cliques, they had frequent interaction because of her tendency to create a disruption in class. Shawn frequently characterized Tower as “strict” and “mean”, but she knew that he was widely respected among students at the school and that he, unlike some of her teachers, would listen to what she had to say. He was known for “keeping it real” with students—just as he “kept it real” with me in the interview, outlining a picture of student groups at the school without “sugar coating” his opinions. Fully acknowledging at the beginning of his narrative that I would likely have a negative perception of what he was about to share, (Tower: This is going to sound really bad), he openly shared his perspectives on students at the school. As I describe in the chapter that follows, student behaviors, particularly the norms of what was considered acceptable female behavior, as well as differences in cliques, particularly behaviors associated with certain cliques, would have a significant effect on the retention of students in the YCfC.

## Social Outcasts

In the previous sections I described students' perceptions of social groups at WVHS. While some attributed divisions to race and others to differing tracks or behaviors, all of the students interviewed mentioned that there were exceptions to these norms. Some mentioned students who floated between groups due to various interests—like the students who were IB but were also into basketball so they hung out with the athletes. However, most of the student interviewees and all of the teacher/administrator interviews mentioned a *social outcast* group at WV. This group was called by a variety of names including “emo,” “lames,” “the out crowd”, and “nerds.” Also, the speaker usually prefaced the naming of the group by phrases like, “the other people, you know, the ones they call them...” For example, Mr. Atkins described:

We have you know, I don't wanna call it nerds but we have kids who are just (pause) They're the out group you know. Another group (sigh) what's the way to put it (pause) I don't know if you call them emo or what. They're just kids that don't fit into other groups. Some call them nerds. I wouldn't call them nerds; they just have different perspectives on the world and if you look at that group in comparison to others, they are probably the most ethnically diverse group on this campus.

Similarly, Assistant Principal Tower described,

We have, you know, I don't wanna call it nerds, but we have kids who are just—they're the out group, you know. Where they're to themselves; you come in the cafeteria in the morning, they're in the corner over here or over there. They're unique, but no one bothers them about their uniqueness. It's obvious they've decided they're going to live life the way they want to, wear the shoes they wanna wear, wear the clothes they wanna wear and no one criticizes them about it; that's the one thing that I can say really works. That you can be yourself without being socially ostracized—they're not thugs; not athletes...

When describing how the students divided socially in the cafeteria at the school, Jayanna stated:

Mostly the people—like they’re some people—like popular people I guess you would say who call them lames or something like that—they got their area.

In the “social outcast” group, students’ commonality seemed to be in the fact that they were *different*—they apparently didn’t share the love of a particular sport, like the athletes, or all dress in the same fashions, like the glamour girls, or share an interest in shoes, like the sneakerheads. They were an eclectic mix of students who had a range of differences that presumably marked them as “strange” and prevented them from fitting in with other groups at the school. I observed students in the out crowd who had physical disabilities, students who wore clothing that was non-typical of other students at WV (one who wore a doctor smock to school, one who dressed “goth,” and some who sported a “thrift store” look) students interested in trading Pokémon cards, dyed hair, and punk rocker clothing. This group included Black, White, Asian, Latino/a, and multiracial students. Interestingly, nobody admitted to being in this group, yet almost everyone referenced this group as the exception to the norm of segregated, racial cliques at the school. In other words, when I asked if the school was racially/culturally segregated, most interviewees said “yes,” but then they referenced the “social outcast” group as the one group at the school that had all races represented. Also, among all of the interviewees that mentioned the “social outcast” group, there was a collective hesitancy at trying to name the group—as if the speaker wanted to find the correct, respectable,

nonoffensive name for the group and struggled to find one. I suggest that social structures at WV pushed students to assimilate and segregate—two sides of the same coin at WV. The acceptable norm at the school was for students to align themselves with students who were like them, and for those who could not readily find their social group, perhaps their only other alternative was to be a part of the “social outcasts”—the group that was respected by some (namely the adults in the building), ignored by others, and viewed by most everyone as odd, strange, and aberrant.

I was unable to collect interviews from any of the students that YCfCers and teachers identified as the “outcrowd,” but I suggest that their status as the only group that resisted dominant norms to segregate by race, track, or behavior was suggestive of the theory of “identities-in-difference” (Alarcón, 1996) described in the literature review chapter. Presumably the outcrowd had found a way to socialize and establish positive relationships across differences in race, class, dress, ability status, and interest. In fact, their commonality seemed to lie in their collective agreement that *difference* and going against the grain was desirable. I was unable to collect specific data from members of the outcast group; however, further analysis is needed on this segment of the WV student population. In the next chapter, I argue that the students that represented the core group of the YCfC, who were also an eclectic mix of individuals in many ways, also bonded across and through their identities-in-difference.

### **Complicating the Discussion of Cliques**

Despite trends that ran consistent with observations, there were a variety of students who saw cliques differently, from being completely oblivious to any differences

around them (Larry and Gerald) to seeing things through racial lenses (Diamond), to seeing them as based on interests (Kaila), or those whose personal stories showed the impact of situational issues (Santiago and Ariana). Interaction with YCfCers and observations of youth behaviors enabled me to complicate some of the surface understandings of cliques at WV. When given the space and opportunity, YCfCers began to show the depth and complexity of their intersectional identities as the year progressed. However, when I initially asked youth to describe their identities, most interpreted this as a question about their personalities and responded with descriptions like “I’m calm” or “I’m friendly”—after which I would typically follow up by asking them more specifically: How do you identify yourself racially? What’s your gender? What’s your social class? For some, these words were unfamiliar, particularly “gender” and “social class”. From my interaction with YCfCers, I would argue that they know *who they are*, but have had few opportunities, particularly in school settings, to unpack, verbalize, and discuss these ideas; therefore, they struggled to describe themselves when I asked questions about identity. For example, my interview with Cameron proceeded as such:

Cherese: Describe your identity.

Cameron: I’m laid back; I am (pause) I am a good person

Cherese: How about your race, class, culture, and gender

Cameron: I’m a colored person...male

Cameron’s use of the word “colored” was surprising. His family was from a Black neighborhood in the deep South, but he currently lived in Victoria. In my experience it

was not typical for youth his age to use the word “colored” to describe themselves racially. As I detailed in Chapter 3, throughout the school year, I continually engaged YCfCers in discussions about their positionalities, introduced theories of the “linked fate” of people of color (Sanchez, 2008, p. 431), prompted them to describe their family histories with one another, and discussed elements of culture. Perhaps, as a result, I began to note a shift in the ways in which students talked about identity. The differences could have resulted from students’ increased comfort level with me or from their increased ability to discuss critical issues, but their opinions in the focus group discussions in the spring were much more nuanced than their responses during initial interviews (Oct-Nov). For example, during the spring focus group, prominent themes emerged that complicated the discussion of cliques, individual identity, and interracial/intercultural relations. In the excerpt below, the students discuss the importance of language and the difficulty of communicating in a second language.

Cherese: What about you Santiago? Are your groups diverse?

Santiago: Not so much so. I think it's language.

Kaila: We have language. We have English.

Santiago: Spanish people wanna talk in their language.

Cherese: How about ya'll who have been speaking English for a long time? Do you still feel more comfortable in Spanish?

Santiago: Yeah that's true!

Francisco: Yeah! Definitely.

While Santiago did not elaborate very much on the idea of language being one of the barriers, his statement resonated with many in the group. It's important to note that most of the students in the group were considered fully English proficient and their comments about the salience of language ran counter to many mainstream beliefs about bilingualism and biculturalism. Kaila's comment, "We [English speakers/Americans/Black people] have language. We have English" reflects a stereotypical belief among native English speakers about second language acquisition. The belief that an individual could easily and seamlessly substitute one language for another one negates and minimizes the importance of native language to an individual's culture and identity. In describing the often painful process of second language acquisition, Peregoy and Boyle (2012) write:

It is essential to realize that adding Standard English as a new language or dialect involves much more than learning grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. It also requires the expansion of one's personal, social, racial, and ethnic identity to make room for the new language and all that it symbolizes and implies. Developing a bilingual, bicultural identity is a dynamic, challenging, and sometimes painful process that continues well into adulthood. (p. 57)

Latino/a YCfCers expressed different comfort levels with socializing in English. This idea of the salience of language in interracial/intercultural interaction was complicated within the group because of different students' comfort level with code switching between Spanish, Standard English, and AAVE (African American Vernacular English).

Flor: Yeah--For me it isn't [about language] but when I'm with my friends that can only speak English and there's like sometimes a person that speaks Spanish, sometimes I'll speak Spanish and my [English speaking] friends be feeling awkward and left out.

Jayanna: My friends just talk Spanish and then me and my other friend, we would just sit there. My other friend is Portuguese and my other friends spoke Spanish and I was the only one that spoke [only] English. They just do that to make me mad—like in a playful way, but you know.

Ariana: They're not your friends

Cherese: Did you ever think, 'maybe I can learn some Spanish and then I can participate'?

Jayanna: I did, but I feel like I'm saying it wrong so I don't wanna say it.

In this dialogue, Flor, a Latina, described that she doesn't feel uncomfortable with language differences, but that she worries about offending her monolingual English-speaking friends by communicating with her friends who only speak Spanish. Next, Jayanna, a Black female, described her discomfort at her Spanish-speaking friends who speak Spanish to each other and exclude her. Also, her comment about the fear of attempting to speak Spanish and being ridiculed for saying something wrong was telling in understanding language obstacles in communication. The conversation continued with a familiar and stereotypical refrain about discomfort with language differences in the nail shop.

Jayanna: Yeah that's like when I go get my toes done and they [Asians] be speaking in all that language and they start talking.

Jayanna: I know they talking about me because then they look at you.

Ariana: I don't like that either. When I go to the Chinese place to get my nails done and I'm like, 'Are you talking about me or something'? They'll look at you, then look at each other, and laugh.

Cherese: How do you know they're Chinese? Could they be Vietnamese?



Kaila: You better learn some Vietnamese!

Cherese: Ariana, what about when you're speaking in Spanish and your English-speaking friends are like, 'Wait a minute! Why you taking about me'?

Ariana: To the people who speak English, I speak English. When it's only Spanish, I speak Spanish.

Cherese: What if it's a mixed group where people speak both?

Ariana: [Emphatically] Then we speak English!

In this dialogue, Ariana seemed to agree with Kaila and Jayanna in being frustrated at the nail shops when they did not understand what was being said—fearing that nail techs were talking about them. Though Spanish is her native language, for Ariana, English represented the common/dominant/default language for conversation as evidenced by her comment that in a mixed group of friends, “We speak English!” Also, for Ariana, Jayanna’s friends who speak Spanish in her presence are not “real” friends. These opinions would not be surprising in a student who had completely assimilated into dominant, mainstream American society; however, Ariana’s behavior and comments did not place her in this category. Although she immigrated to the US at a very young age, she was proudly Mexican, lived in a Mexican neighborhood, spoke Spanish regularly, was very close to Hispanic family and friends, and expressed a lot of pride and respect for her language and culture. Yet, the one difference I noted between her and other YCfCers is that she codeswitched easily between Spanish and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) which seemed to facilitate her interaction with her Black peers. In fact, Ariana served as one of the first “cultural bridges” that broke the ice of

segregation in the group. Although other Latino YCfCers used elements of AAVE occasionally during meetings (Daniel's typical speech patterns were a blend of AAVE and standard English) Ariana's codeswitching was different: She would often seamlessly change her language, expressions, and gestures depending on who she was speaking with.

A turning point moment in the YCfC group was facilitated by Ariana and occurred shortly after YCfCers were interrogated by school resource officers following the theft of my cell phone. The YCfC meeting that occurred after the stolen phone incident was a memorable moment (this incident is described in greater detail in the next chapter). As I uncomfortably tried to discuss what had happened, Ariana jumped out of her seat and began describing in her "best" AAVE—with curses, neck rolls, finger snaps, and gestures—about how the police tried to arrest her and put her in the patrol car, and how she "cussed him out" as a result. The other YCfCers were visibly shocked and seemingly impressed by her dramatic display, and the first crack in the invisible borders between members of the group began to emerge. As I became closer to Ariana and others and found out more about their lives, I realized that observations about cliques in the school were snapshots that failed to include past histories of students and potential shifts in social groups. For example Ariana's social group had shifted drastically after middle school.

Ariana: In elementary school, I didn't know what best friends really was. I had this one friend—he was Black and I would tell him everything and he would tell me everything too. So once I got to middle school, still the same thing. That was the only guy that I could trust and I would hang out with a lot of Black people when I was in middle school—I would be like all Black, like act like I was Black and everything. When I was there, I was bad. I was the bad child there. I had all

Fs. Never got a single A. That was when I first started smoking weed. My dad was gonna switch me schools, but I started realizing that what I was doing was not right. I would sneak out the house and everything. My dad found out and he told me if I kept doing that, he was gonna take me to alternative school. And I like—when he started telling me that, I started backing away from them [the bad crowd].

Cherese: It was a particular crowd of kids you were hanging out with and they weren't the best influence?

Ariana: Yeah. They weren't. I still talk to them, but it's not like we used to talk. And now it's just a 'hey' and a 'bye' or 'how are you'. My dad said that I have to choose the right people. They don't care what race I hang out with. They just want me to choose the right people who influence me right.

Ariana had an older brother at WV, who according to her, still hangs with a lot of Black youth outside of school. But Ariana's social groups are now very small (2-3 close friends) and all Latino/a. Other students expressed similar sentiments as they described the importance of keeping their social group very small to avoid getting into trouble. Kaila described, "There's different groups in school. You know like certain people that hang out with certain people. I don't care who I hang out with as long as they're not the ones that get in trouble most of the time." As I described earlier in the description of Santiago's past gang activity, students who had previous brushes with crime, delinquency, gangs, and drugs seemed to be very careful about their social group choices. This idea was emphasized in several interviews across race/cultural group. Many remarked that they did not even venture into their neighborhoods for fear of getting in trouble and were careful about befriending new people that they did not know for fear of getting in trouble. These past brushes with the "wrong friends" inhibited students' willingness to initiate interracial/intercultural interactions. For this reason, the YCfC

served an important role in giving students a space to interrogate the race/ethnicity, class, and gender issues associated with school cliques.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

In analyzing data on youth identities, I explored the relationship between notions of self/other and youth relationships with other race/ethnicity peers. As I discussed in the first chapter, Glesne (2010), argued that “each of us live at the complex and shifting intersections of identity categories such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, wellness, and nationality, and so on” (p. 154). In analyzing how youth describe their identities and the identities of those around them, I theorized about the interplay of youth identities and intercultural/interracial relations. In particular, I sought to discover whether they saw their identities as fixed race “boxes,” if their identities were more fluid and shifting as Glesne described, and what social/institutional/contextual barriers may have been inhibiting youth exploration into these various identities. I sought to uncover how students worked out the particulars of their identities in relation to others in urban school settings. Similarly I wondered whether students who had more fluid, rather than fixed, understandings of their identities “took up” intercultural/interracial relations in more positive ways.

Although YCfCers described at length their perceptions of cliques at WV, none of them placed themselves within any of the cliques they named. This represents a prominent finding. I argue that institutional barriers at the school and the absence of opportunities to explore their intersectional identities influenced YCfCers willingness to

align themselves with any of the groups at the school. I offer two explanations to expand on this theory.

First, interviewees experienced difficulty (for some) and hesitancy (for others) at describing their identities and identifying their social groups. I acknowledge the potential influence of an artificial interview environment with an adult interviewer asking strange and uncomfortable questions. To attempt to account for this, I held “official” initial interviews with students, but then I continued to collect informal data on students’ thoughts and perceptions throughout the year—including their shifting perspectives about identity. Notwithstanding the challenges of an interview setting, students had difficulty describing their identities—almost as if they lacked the vocabulary, the words, the expressions, or perhaps the confidence to articulate how they felt about themselves. I argue that certain elements of the school environment (tracking, limited single-identity based cliques, struggle with culturally relevant competency) stifled students’ exploration into their fluid identities. Because of the segregation at the school, race was the first division for most cliques. This fact limited students from interacting with students who they may have had a great deal in common. For example, Santiago and Jayanna bonded during the YCfC perhaps because of their similarities—both had quiet, reserved demeanors, both enjoyed and were talented at sketching drawings, both were very interested in sports, but played on teams outside of school—Jayanna played basketball and Santiago played soccer. However, in the normal routines of school, their paths *may* have crossed in a class, but it is doubtful they would have ever interacted. Even in class spaces where there were more opportunities for interracial/intercultural interaction, it

rarely happened primarily due to a predominance of classes that were very teacher directed (limited time for student interaction). When students did have an opportunity to do group work, they typically were allowed to choose their own groups, and defaulted back to their same racial/cultural groups.

Second, I posit that the cliques highlighted by students and administrators at the school were not possibly broad and expansive enough to encompass all of the fluidity and diversity of students at the school. In many ways, the cliques were limiting and based on single aspects of a student's identity (i.e. Physical ability, physical appearance, transgressive school behavior). Also, I would argue that when some YCfCers stated, "I'm not in a group," this represented their deliberate choice to opt out and not to be a part of a group because of the limited choices that they had to choose from. Furthermore, there were deficits associated with many of the cliques that students described. Students' reticence at placing themselves within a group perhaps occurred because they were hesitant to "out" themselves—thus dealing with the discomfort of placing certain aspects of their personality/identity on display. While the social outcast group was tolerated, left alone, not bullied, and seemed to embrace fluid identities, the students there wouldn't be characterized as being "cool" or having any sort of status at the school. They were left alone to be who they wanted to be, but most considered them "weird" "odd" or "lame". Loud and ratchet girls, thug boys and thug girls often got in trouble because their behaviors rubbed up against school expectations for behavior; for the glamour girls, there was perhaps a perception of a sexualized element to the group—as Ariana said, to be a glamour girl perhaps meant the temptation or expectation to "pass your body around." If

nothing else, their physical appearances were often the center of attention, which required a particular level of confidence and investment that some girls could not/would not want to aspire to. Being athletic required talent or at a minimum a monetary and time commitment from family to involve students in sports from a young age so that they could be competitive in high school. Being a cheerleader or dancer also required talent and/or money and transportation. As students pointed out the cliques at the school, I realized that many of the YCfCers really *didn't* fit into any of the groups they highlighted at the school. Many of them came to school, went home, and interacted with their family and a select group of friends. As Shawn described, some of the kids at the school were the “quiet kids” that didn't call attention to themselves. They weren't particularly involved in extracurricular activities at school, they did not like to get in trouble at school, and some didn't want to be the center of attention.

Many of the students that persisted in the YCfC, though admittedly in segregated groups at school, were (or had been) border crossers or cultural bridges in other ways. Yet, there were limited spaces at WV for an expression of these personalities. For example, Ariana, who often performed the role of a social chameleon, frequently shifted personas. If she was with the “loud and ratchet” girls, she performed this role. When she was with the immigrant Latino/a students, she could fit in there as well. However, for the most part, she seemed to be a loner, had walls built up around her, and didn't trust people easily. Perhaps there was insufficient space at WV for her to bring all of the parts of who she was. Quinten, a Black male YCfCer, had attended an elementary school with the most diverse populations in Victoria. Rainbow Road Elementary school had a large

refugee population, many speakers of various languages, and students who had immigrated there from all over the world. Though his friend groups at WV were Black, he had grown up socializing with students who spoke many different languages, were from different countries, and had different traditions. Santiago had experienced ethnic conflict in gang life and had seen the down side of ethnic divisions and affiliations. As a result, he was cautious about new people—even other Latinos— but had a sensitive, open personality that made him willing to participate in interracial/intercultural interaction, particularly within a safe environment. Jayanna shared that she had attended a school where she was one of the only Black students. She played basketball on an all-White female team and expressed that while she was there, “she thought she was White and wanted to be White.” It would seem that her interest in basketball would place her with the basketball clique at WV, but evidently she did not feel comfortable with this group; instead, Jayanna’s in-school social group consisted of her older brother and a couple of his close friends. I would argue that for these YCfCers and others, coming to the YCfC meetings provided them a chance to explore the fluidity of their identities, reflect on their past experiences with diversity, and ask critical questions about how they could collectively make a valuable contribution to their school and community.

Why talk about identity categories and notions of self/other? Anzaldúa (2012) argued that before societal change can occur, we must resolve the misunderstandings in our mind about identity categories. She conceptualized subjectivity, as not possessing fixed and essentialized qualities, but as “multiple”, “a site of struggle” and “changing over time” (p. 411). Therefore, it is constituted in a variety of spaces, in a variety of



ways, and ebbs and flows intersectionally along lines of race, class, gender, language, and nation. Data collected from students of color at WV illustrate the ways in which youth attempt to navigate identity as well as the range of identities that go well beyond the “youth of color” label. YCfCers perspectives highlighted the fluid nature of youth identities, the ways in which they were influenced by context, and the ways youth attempted to push back against negative characterizations of themselves.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **FROM SEGREGATION TO BONDING IN THE YCfC**

Even in research that purports to be “critical” youth studies, adults maintain power over the research process and there is little description of the power struggles, obstacles, and stumbling blocks that ensue as adults and youth negotiate power in forming youth groups. As a teacher/facilitator of the YCfC, I faced both successes and challenges. In creating the group, I sought to combine a youth studies approach that centered the perspectives of youth and focused on their potential for agency and resistance. Simultaneously from a critical raced and gendered perspective, I sought to create the YCfC to explore, study, and intervene in intercultural/interracial relations in the group. Stated another way, I engaged in a shaky balancing act in which I attempted to perform as both teacher and facilitator, leader and follower, teacher and learner. In the sections below, I describe the process by which YCfCers navigated the segregation and mistrust created by their race/culture and track differences. Then, I highlight my attempts to engage youth in creating a meeting space that privileged youth perspectives and allowed youth to feel “known” by their peers and by me as the adult facilitator. Then, I describe how youth went from segregation to bonding as they began to reflect upon their intersectional identities. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how WV data helps to

expand and contribute to existing research on PAR/critical youth studies, critical race theory, and intercultural relations.

### **Beginning the Journey: Segregation, Silence, and Mistrust**

In order to fully explain the significance of the students' shift, it is important to describe the segregation, silence, and conflict that characterized our initial meetings. Also, the WV project focused on exploring identity and intercultural relations through YPAR; therefore, an analysis of youth behaviors as we co-facilitated the group was an essential part of data collection. In much of the prominent literature on YPAR groups, youth interaction during initial phases of the project is rarely discussed. Buried among the theory, literature review, and methods, stories of the awkwardness of bringing a group of youth together to do PAR has been missing from much of literature. There are several possible reasons for these omissions. First, the restrictions of journal page counts encourage authors to skip introductory details to have space to focus on results. Also, PAR at its core is action-focused and a collaborative endeavor between the researchers and PAR participants; therefore, in many PAR studies the primary focus is on the collaborative research project and the results of the project. Much less common are stories about the logistics of creating a YPAR group and the potential pitfalls that might occur, particularly when implementation occurs in a high school setting (for a notable exception, see Ozer & Wright 2012).

The first meetings of the YCfC were characterized by segregation, silence, and mistrust. While I constantly emphasized my role as a facilitator and encouraged YCfCers to step up as leaders in the group, I soon realized that the critical youth studies ideology I

purported to implement ran counter to what most of the students had experienced. Early in the semester, I explained that I had created the name Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC) as a recruitment tool, but that we could collectively decide on a different name for our group. After brief consideration, students decided to keep the name. This was a fairly easy and quick decision, but when I asked students to think about how they wanted to structure our meetings, I was met with quite a bit of silence, frustration, and confusion. One of the students finally spoke up and suggested, “Why don’t you just tell us the rules and tell us what we need to do?” This would be the first of many situations in which the YCfCers and I navigated the precariousness of going against long-established hierarchies between students and teachers, youth and adults. I argue that students’ prior experiences with student/teacher hierarchies may have worked to impede youth from immediately stepping up as leaders and taking ownership of the group.

From the beginning, I was very intentional about the atmosphere and relationships I wanted to cultivate with students in the group to foster leadership and positive relationships. I encouraged them to call me by my first name, did my best not to “police” their behavior during group sessions, and attempted to create an atmosphere in which we made decisions collectively and collaboratively. The location of YCfC meetings was an important component in cultivating relationships. Our designated meeting space was at a table in the cafeteria—a space that we had to share with the hip hop club. After our first meeting, I realized the cafeteria was not an ideal location for our meetings and sought another space in the school. One of the school administrators gave us permission to use the history department teachers’ lounge and the small room was perfect for our group. In

the middle of the room was a large conference table surrounded by several chairs. On one wall, there was a couch, a few office chairs, and file cabinets. On the other wall, there was a large cork board, a printer and another table. Directly across from this wall was another wall with a large whiteboard, another printer, and bookshelves. Although occasionally teachers came in to make copies or retrieve books, normally we had open access to the entire space including printers, whiteboards, corkboards, and file cabinet. These proved to be valuable resources as we began to work on our letters, petitions and awareness posters. The space looked more like a meeting space than a classroom, but it also possessed whiteboards that we could use for activities and brainstorming.

Encouraging students to collaborate with me and with one another represented a significant challenge. Students had no reason to trust me. They didn't completely understand what I wanted from them or what my agenda entailed, and I was a complete stranger to them. Further, WV was a very large school and interview data revealed that most of the YCfCers navigated in fairly small, segregated social circles. With the exception of those who came with friends, most of them were also unfamiliar with each other. Similar to the wider school context, during the first several YCfC meetings, students segregated by race (the Black students on one side of the room and the Latino/a students on the other) and by track (the IB students clustered together at the table in the center of the room and the regular ed. students seated on the couch and other chairs in the room). Students refused to work together, sat separately, and rarely responded to any of my questions. Though I had spoken with many of the YCfCers individually and they expressed excitement at being a part of the group, during initial meetings, these excited

students turned solemn with faces that read, “I’d rather be anywhere but here.” Students maintained little eye contact with me, had their earbuds on, stayed on their phones the entire time, and refused to sit in a circle and face peers during group discussions. The exceptions to these behaviors were the IB students who immediately emerged as leaders in the group. Well-versed in playing the game of school, the IB students usually readily complied with the directives of teachers; thus they quickly responded to my attempts to elicit discussion.

While student relationships were the area of focus in the research project, the relationships that I built with individual students, and the group as a whole, were crucial to fostering an environment that privileged student leadership. During the first meeting and many subsequent meetings, requests such as “Can I go to the bathroom?” or “Can I go to Ms. Brown’s class to pick up something?” were common. My usual response was,

You don’t have to ask my permission. I’m not here to police your behavior. If you need to step out, just let us know as a courtesy. You guys are the leaders of this group. I’m here as a facilitator, but we have a lot to get done today and if you’re not here we’ll miss your presence.

While there were a couple students who took advantage of this position to roam the hallways, as we built cohesiveness as a group and began to experience exciting, engaging activities, students didn’t want to leave and if they legitimately had to leave, they would hurry back so as not to miss anything. For example, Kaila loved to roam the halls and consistently asked to leave because she was bored, because she wasn’t interested in the topic of the day, or for a host of other unknown reasons. Early on, she would leave and

stay gone the entire session, coming back during the last 10 minutes to retrieve her book bag. After a few weeks of this, she became more connected to the group and left less and less. She began to engage more with other YCfCers and began to take leadership and ownership in what we were trying to accomplish. Kaila became one of the integral members of the YCfC who came consistently and rarely ever missed a meeting.

### **IB/Regular Ed. Student Conflict**

In the YCfC, I attempted to cultivate a multilingual, multicultural environment where students learned to interact across their race/culture/language differences. Due to my interest in Black and Latino/a relations, I was primed and ready to explore interracial/intercultural interaction in the group; however, an unanticipated finding was that students of the same race segregated themselves by track. Diamond, a former IB student, described the “divide” that existed between IB and regular ed. students.

Diamond: That's where the superiority and inferiority comes along. We have this and you don't where even in adulthood, some people have certain jobs and other people don't so it's like this long domino effect. So the grouping of ourselves isn't on purpose, but through the classes we're put in and how we're tested and how we're viewed as this—the divide.

The “divide” that Diamond mentions, though seemingly just academic track related, had strong, yet unspoken, social class implications as well. Also, this “divide” significantly affected the retention of IB students in the YCfC. The initial meetings of the YCfC were characterized by tension between students in the IB program and those in regular ed. classes. Early in the process of recruiting students for the YCfC, I spoke at length with a local scholar who had implemented a university-sponsored PAR project with a group of

high schoolers. He emphasized that his YPAR group was filled with high achievers who were college bound and dedicated to successfully completing a PAR project.

As I began the project at WV, I thought very little about students' academic abilities—I was simply looking for a diverse group of students who would stay with me the entire year. During our first interest meeting for the YCfC, all but two of the attendees were IB students. There were seven students in total—6 females, 1 male, 6 Black and 1 mixed race (African-American /Latino/a) student. They were excited to learn about YPAR and had great ideas. I wrote furiously on my notepad as they described their already super-busy schedules filled with college preparatory classes, church functions, sports, volunteer activities, and more. This was the first and only meeting that I could characterize in this way; as I recruited a larger, more diverse group, the dynamics of the first meeting changed from an exchange of great ideas to the silent, solemn, mistrustful atmosphere that I described in the previous section. As the group grew in size, the IB students that I had originally recruited stepped up as leaders, sat together at the table during meetings, and were the most vocal. They seemed to be the strongest critical thinkers, were confident in their opinions, and no matter the activity we were engaging in, wanted to move at a fast pace. However, their frustration and irritation with some of their non-IB YCfC peers was obvious from the beginning. By the middle of October, the frustration was growing. During one particularly toxic session, I asked students to share thoughts about a YPAR media clip they had watched. As Tasha and Akila (IB students) attempted to share their thoughts about the clip, Kaila and Shawn (regular ed. students)—already sitting with their backs to Tasha, Akila, and other



YCfCers—snickered and laughed, rolled their eyes, talked loudly to each other about things unrelated to the clip, and continually got up and down and moved around the room. Tasha and Akila were visibly upset about their peers' behaviors, so I stopped the discussion and addressed the entire group, asking everyone to be respectful of each other. After everyone left, Akila said,

Ms. Cherese, I don't think I can deal with the kids in this group. Plus, I don't think we're gonna get far or make much progress at the rate we're going. Maybe you should switch me to the other group.

A few weeks later, all of the original IB YCfCers, except for Tasha and Diamond, had stopped attending meetings. During the last meeting that Tasha attended, she looked angry the entire time and refused to participate. After everyone left, she converted back to her usual, talkative, friendly demeanor and we chatted about ideas for the group. Tasha did not return to the YCfC and eventually began to avoid me when she saw me walking towards her in the hallway. Seeking to ascertain more information about the school wide dynamics between IB and regular ed. students, I asked Kaila her thoughts about the dynamics between IB and regular ed. students at the school.

Some AP<sup>8</sup> and IB students, I'm cool with them because they're funny and they know how to keep a conversation going. Some IB students keep themselves in their own spaces. They feel like they run everything because they're in a higher standing and I just don't like that and people who are higher than standard people—they're the same people as you—you don't treat them differently just because you know more than they do.

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<sup>8</sup> Advanced Placement—high school courses that can be taken for future college credit

Cherese: What about the Black kids in IB, Do they hang with everybody or stick with themselves?

Kaila: (pause) You know, I think they're cool with everybody because I know some kids in there that I'm cool with and they're IB, but they're still kind of prissy and uptight. That just gets to me. I'm a standard person, and you know I can be very—you know distant from some people, but I don't treat people differently than what I am.

Kaila's perceptions of IB students' desire to "run everything" and be "prissy and uptight" shed light on the undercurrent of conflict that I sensed in our initial meetings. The IB students assumed leadership and control in the group and did not hide their disapproval of some of the regular ed. students' behaviors. Perhaps, the regular ed. students knew that they were being looked down upon by their IB peers and resisted. When the IB students showed outward disapproval at their peers' behaviors, it is possible that the regular ed. students resisted in ways that further disrupted group meetings. On the other hand, perhaps IB and regular ed. YCfCers possessed different beliefs about class comportment and relationships with teachers. While some of the behaviors of the regular ed. students may have been as a result of their resistance to their IB peers attempts to control the group, there were other blatant and obvious differences between how the two groups of students had been socialized to perform in classroom environments.

While I shared some of the IB students' frustration with the initial behaviors in the YCfC (throwing food, not being focused, being rude), I interpreted these behaviors as youth testing their boundaries. After having their every movement and utterance policed constantly throughout the school day, students arrived to the YCfC meetings—in an

environment where I, as the teacher/facilitator, purported to cultivate a space where youth were free to make their own rules and govern themselves—and began to test the waters to see if I was really serious about letting them lead. My philosophy was that over time, with mentorship, gentle guidance, and engaging material, they would decide for themselves that they wanted to behave differently. In contrast, most of the IB students had been tracked as IB, accelerated, or gifted their entire lives. I would argue that they had experienced much less of the behavioral micro-management that occurred in regular ed. classes. In essence, they had already been socialized to self-regulate and adjust their behaviors in different spaces.

The IB YCfCers had very much embraced the codes of middle class interaction with adults/teachers/those in power in their classroom speech and behavior. They were more formal in their interaction with me, and they seemed to prefer a fairly quiet, structured, orderly meeting. For some, such as Diamond, there was a clear delineation between school behavior and home behavior. In her mind, other students in the group constantly transgressed these apparent boundaries in acting “ratchet” at school. She expressed to me that she was bothered by other YCfCers tendency to call me by my first name, curse, throw things at each other, not remain focused on the topic I had given them to discuss, and talk over/interrupt each other. Although she admitted that her home behavior and behavior with friends may have been equally “ratchet,” she was bothered that they behaved this way in front of me. This perhaps explained the differences in candidness and openness that I experienced between conversations with IB students and regular ed. students. While these differences in student behaviors were not etched in

stone and there were exceptions, there were particular trends and patterns that I noticed in my interaction with students in various tracks. For many of the regular ed. students, once they were sure that I wasn't a teacher and that our conversations were confidential, many of them felt open to share their adventures and escapades including skipping school, smoking, partying, and fighting. On the other hand, while I imagine some of the IB students were engaged in similar behaviors, they were not willing to share this information with me as an adult and teacher figure. They typically preferred to talk with me about topics like preparing for college, tips for studying for tests, juggling classes and jobs, and preparing for the future.

In one such instance, our YCfC meeting had ended for the day and Diamond stayed after to talk to me about college applications. As we talked, Brian wandered in the room, sat down, and began to talk to us as well. Brian was not in the YCfC, but I had met him because his teacher often sent him in the YCfC room to retake tests or do make-up work. I introduced him to Diamond and we started to chat about school. During this conversation, he mentioned not being able to concentrate on his work because he had been drinking *lean*, a popular, home-made drink that I had heard many of the kids whisper about. "What is *lean*?" I asked him. "I keep hearing people talk about it and I have no idea what it is." He began to brag that he made it all the time and that people have been drinking it for years. He remarked:

Back in your day, they probably called it *syzurp*. I don't know how other people make it, but people here mix up promethazine [prescription antihistamine/sedative], codeine syrup, jolly ranchers, and Sprite. I can't do it when I'm a 30 somethin' year old man so I gotta do it now.

As my mind raced about the potential effects this combination of drugs probably had on the developing youth brain, Diamond, in her soft-spoken but intense way of speaking, began to lecture Brian about making good choices and staying away from things like *lean*. Brian sat there with an uncomfortable, I've-just-been-chastised look on his face. "I feel you," he said. The moment passed and we continued talking. True to movie stereotypes, Diamond was a cheerleader, dated one of the star football players, and was well-known at the school. Perhaps Brian felt that his stories about making *lean* would be impressive to her—nothing was further from the truth. The conversation with Diamond and Brian was not characterized by the same animosity that I witnessed between IB and regular ed. YCfCers, but it was representative of the differences in students' ideas about classroom appropriate topics. Would Diamond have chastised Brian in this way if I had not been present? It's difficult to say, but my hunch is that some of her lecture was for my benefit. She seemed uncomfortable that he may have transgressed a particular boundary by talking about *lean* with me—an adult and teacher figure. It is likely that she felt she needed to respond in some way to prevent any assumptions that she agreed or concurred with what he was describing.

There are other possible reasons for students' differences in beliefs about classroom comportment and interaction with adults/teachers. IB students were accustomed to being schooled in classroom environments characterized by engaging, thought-provoking learning, and while I am sure IB classes were not problem free, in general the IB class atmosphere worked for those students. IB students didn't seem to feel oppressed by school, they were being challenged and stimulated academically, they

were treated as intelligent by teachers and peers, and they were viewed as a special population at the school. In contrast, in several of the regular ed. YCfCers classes, teachers focused heavily on redirecting behavior, classes frequently had substitute teachers, there were many classes with new teachers who were still struggling with classroom management, and/or classes were characterized by nonengaging, nonacademically stimulating work.

Also, the possibility exists that IB and regular ed. YCfCers differed in social class status. Social class represented a difficult construct for students to describe for many reasons—some were unaccustomed to describing their identities in general and some had no idea of what social class really meant. Some of the IB students did not stay in the group long enough for me to collect data on their social class. Also, if part of social class is determined by income, it may be unfair to assume that youth have had the types of conversations with their parents that would provide them with information about family income. There were regular ed. YCfCers who stated that they were from middle class families (Quinten) as well as IB students who said that their families were working class (Diamond); yet, Quinten and Diamond could have been exceptions to the dominant trends in their respective track. Statistics on IB programs across the country show that the majority of IB students are White and middle class. A 2009 profile showed that in IB programs across the nation, student demographics were 59% White, 15% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 4% other (“IB US Country Profile,” 2014). Statistics about socioeconomic status, determined by the numbers of students eligible for free and/or reduced lunch, showed that only 16% of IB students nationwide came from low-income

families (Perna, L. W., May, H., Yee, A., Ransom, T., Rodriguez, A., & Fester, R., 2013). At WV, even if IB students were not middle class, they were accustomed to operating in middle class school settings (IB classrooms), particularly in their speech, class comportment, and behavior towards adults at the school. There was a particular decorum that IB YCfCers seemed to expect and think was appropriate in YCfC meetings and the rebellious behaviors of many of their non-IB peers seemed in direct contrast to these expectations.

Another important note in the IB/regular ed. conflict was that tension and ill-feelings primarily existed between girls in the group. The males in the YCfC were all regular ed. and while their behaviors could have been seen as equally “problematic” to IB YCfCers, the tension, eye rolling, and disrespect occurred between girls in the group. Further, the term “ratchet,” that was often used at the school, typically denoted female behaviors. Though “ratchet” could be used to describe many things from cars to behaviors, it was most often a gendered term to imply that a woman was unacceptable, ghetto, nasty, or had questionable behaviors—often sexual. Although the word was used by youth to describe behavior (loud, aggressive, nothing to lose), it was only reserved for certain girls at the school—those of a particular race, class, and track—Black or Latinas (particularly those Latinas who were perceived as “acting Black”), working class or poor, and regular ed. track.

The use of the term ratchet and the underlying tension between IB and regular ed. students borrows from long held tensions in communities of color around the “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001). Black woman, by virtue of not being

White, were often located outside of the boundaries of womanhood, and therefore deemed unrespectable (Collins, 1990/1999; White, 2001). White argued that this struggle to establish the Black woman as good, respectable, and therefore worthy of respect established hierarchies between Black women of various social classes, as wealthy/middle class women attempted to regulate the behaviors of working class and poor Black women. The politics of respectability essentialized (and continues to essentialize) women of color in ways that fail to make space for those outside of the middle class and “may actually be contributing to certain forms of class oppression” (White, 2001, p. 61-63). As White (2001) described, it is through narratives that we make sense of the world and better understand the multiplicity of our experiences as raced, classed, gendered people (p. 1-2). YCfCers achieved great feats in working through various race/culture differences throughout the semester; however, the failure to retain IB students represented an important theme in data analysis that I will consider as I look to future research around youth identities and coalition building. In retrospect, if I had anticipated academic or social class tension between IB and regular ed. students, I would have been more prepared to address it head on by strategically selecting topics that illuminated how navigating in a racist, classist society has constructed barriers not only among different racial/cultural groups, but also among members of the same group.



## **Turning Points on the Way to Solidarity**

I don't have the energy or desire to even be here today. They violated my trust in a big way. I've worked in some of the worst schools and had a lot of things stolen from me by students (my lunch, an MP3 player, flash drives, a projector)—but the thefts were by students who didn't know me well—not by MY students; never by students I had put time and energy in with. Somehow I falsely expected my niceness and efforts to build rapport to have formed a protective barrier around me. This wasn't the case. I'm not sure why the theft of my cell phone was a turning point for our group. Maybe students saw that I came back despite the theft and felt sorry for me. "We should help this lady do this project. It must be really important for her." Or perhaps they saw me at a vulnerable moment—I wanted this project to work so badly and when the phone was stolen this seemed to be the culmination of a series of failures. They saw a crack in my polished, well-thought out veneer. --Cherese's Journal Reflection

In the excerpt above, I describe one of the turning points in the YCfC group. This event marked the beginning of our journey to build bridges across our differences and to get past the silence and segregation that separated us. After one of the YCfCers stole my cell phone, I felt very apprehensive about meeting with them. When the incident occurred, the group was still in its infancy stages and I was uncertain about how the theft would negatively affect the bridges we were trying to build. As I prepared to meet with them on the Thursday following the cell phone incident, I wondered: How would I address the fact that I had accused them of stealing from me? How would we process the fear and suspicion students felt when administrators and school resource officers began to interrogate them? Would I be able to get past students' refusal to "snitch" on their friends? How would we collectively address the fact that when pressured by administrators, they began to blame each other (Black girls: I think that Hispanic girl took it—the one that was using your computer during our group work; Hispanic girls: I

think it was that Black girl who sits next to the door that took it—you know the one). How would I shake my feelings of guilt at involving the authorities (administrators and police) in the situation? I was unsure of what would happen or even if students would show up for the meeting. On the same morning of the post-theft meeting, the Ferguson verdict (or non-verdict) was announced. As a result, Ferguson was burning and people were upset all over the country about Black lives and police violence. As I drove to WV that morning, I realized that in light of what was happening in the country, my worry over one of the YCfCers stealing my phone paled in comparison. When I arrived at the school that morning, for the first time that semester, I just showed up with no particular plans to “teach” anything. The YCfCers showed up, were much calmer than usual, and opened up about a variety of things. We talked about the cell phone; we talked about Ferguson; we talked about our families; we talked about plans for Thanksgiving; we talked about what was going on in the school. As a result, this particular meeting represented an important shift in the group. Students finally took the first steps toward bonding as a group. They learned about Ariana’s ability to code switch from Spanish to standard English to African American Vernacular English (AAVE); we collectively mourned the injustices occurring in Ferguson; students seemed genuinely concerned about what happened to my phone; and for the first time, they shared stories about their homes and families.

### **Conflicting Perspectives**

The YCfC curriculum and activities were co-constructive and ongoing in that I sought to address concerns as they arose using discussion, media, and songs. As we began to engage with each other more, conflicts arose that needed to be addressed. I

argue that students' willingness to debate and argue with each other represented an important step toward solidarity as a group. For example, as we continued to delve into discussions of injustices being faced by communities of color, several misperceptions emerged. Some students mentioned that they wanted to learn about President Obama's Executive Order on Immigration. By this point in the semester, the IB students had stopped coming (Diamond still came occasionally) and the core group of YCfCers were Black and Latino/a regular ed. students. Although we had been working together as a group for more than a month, there had been little evidence of cross-cultural interaction. As we began to discuss the Executive Order, the conversations that began to occur around immigration represented the first whole group discussion that had occurred thus far. After Daniel asked, "I thought we were going to talk about the President's immigration order," Kaila responded:

I don't know why he wants to just let a bunch of immigrants in—why don't they just stay in their own country. They say they want to come here for a better life, but things are not that much better here than in their country. Like they can buy a house cheaper there than here. If I was from Mexico, well I wouldn't be from Mexico, but maybe Honduras or somewhere, I would stay where I was. We don't need immigrants coming here bringing diseases and stuff.

When Kaila finished speaking, there was an awkward silence among the entire group as even the students who were engaged in side conversations with each other stopped talking. The Black students in the group looked at Daniel and Manuel, the only two Latino students in attendance that day. Daniel was sitting at the table with Kaila and Manuel was seated on the couch close by. As Kaila talked, Black YCfCers went from

silence to mumbling “ooh” “uh oh” and “she racist”. Some laughed and some looked at her with anger and frustration. Manuel, seated on the couch engrossed in his phone, never even looked up. Kaila, perhaps deliberately trying to bait Daniel and Manuel, turned her chair around so she was facing them as she spoke. Daniel shook his head in frustration and began to try to talk over Kaila to tell her she was wrong. Kaila laughed and playfully tapped Daniel on the arm as she talked. Daniel spoke up:

First of all, don’t touch me. Second of all, just because people are immigrants doesn’t mean they are here illegally. What are you trying to say about my parents? What are you trying to say about my parents [loudly]?

In attempts to make the interaction an educational moment, I invited students to continue to voice their questions and concerns with the group—but reminded them that we needed to be respectful to each other. I shared with them a video clip that had recently been published online by my former ESL student, who now worked for an immigration law firm, in which he described why the Executive Order would have such a positive impact on families in the state. Later that day, I spoke with students individually to find out their impressions of the conversation. Manuel insisted that he didn’t really hear what Kaila had said because he had other things on his mind. Kaila made light of her comments saying that she was “just joking”. I asked her if she thought Daniel seemed upset by the things she said, and she responded that she didn’t know. Immigration was a controversial issue in the group so we continued discussing it as we simultaneously worked on building awareness regarding issues of police brutality. Students began making posters about both issues, as we alternated back and forth between discussions of each topic.

Soon after, as more Latino/a participants began to join our group and we began having more in depth discussions about the Executive Order on Immigration, Kaila remarked that she wasn't sure she agreed with supporting immigrants being able to stay in the country. Carlos, a 12<sup>th</sup> grade YCfCer, was very active in the group before winter break, but had to leave the group in January due to family concerns. Carlos and Kaila had a vigorous class discussion about immigration, an excerpt of which is shown below.

Kaila: Ya'll from other countries coming over here "crossing the border" [exaggerated emphasis]—they have a border line for a reason

Carlos: The streets down here ain't nothing—like over there you won't survive not even a mile. Not even to the corner of your house.

Kaila: You right—I wouldn't survive in ya'll type of environment [sarcastically]

Carlos: Like you would barely make it to your bus stop in Mexico [continues talking but she talks over him]

Kaila: I don't really understand where ya'll coming from. These girls [referring to a previous conversation with Latina YCfCers]—they was like, 'people are getting killed in Mexico; that's why we moved over here to America.' I don't understand ya'll's lifestyle over there in Mexico or Honduras or El Salvador over there them places, but if you gon' come to America, come to America with your papers. Don't come illegally cuz you know that's just crazy.

Carlos: [becoming increasingly agitated] Yeah to be honest like, do you know how much that shit can fucking cost? Like it takes like pesos; they don't take like dollars, like here

Kaila: What's pesos?

Carlos: [begins to stutter to get his point out; gets louder as Kaila tries to interrupt] So for my whole family to get visas, how much money do I have to spend? If each one is like 8,000 pesos, for me my daughter, my son, my wife, that's like a bunch of money and the time—the process—it'll take a lot of time; cuz I'm a dreamer. I don't know if you heard about it; like what Obama passed like two years ago, three years ago. So for me to get that, I had to pay 500 dollars

and that shit is like—that is ok; like \$500. I got that in a paycheck and that's it. 500! Now if I was in Mexico, it would be like 88,000 pesos and I'd be like what the fuck [emphasis].

Kaila listens quietly as Carlos goes on to explain the reasons many kids find themselves in the US as immigrants.

Carlos: Let's say you're not an American and your parents say, 'Let's go here.' You ask the question, 'Where?' They gonna say, 'Don't worry about it; you just come with us—You gonna be safe with us.' And it's your mom and dad, so you just come. You ain't got no choice—you can't stay there by yourself—you have to go. Then when you get here, you know, then you compare yourself when you're little. You gotta grow up in America and you want the same rights as you know Americans cuz you been here since you were little. I'm not saying that I want my rights—I really don't want my rights—I really don't care [with anger]  
[Silence]

Cherese: Carlos, When did you come here? How old were you?

Carlos: I was like probably 6 or 7. They put me in first grade—they held me back in first grade cuz this shit they told me—'He won't complain, so you going back to first grade.' See if I had known some English I would've fuckin'—[shakes his head in frustration].

Cherese: Yeah that was messed up. You're doing good now. You're about to graduate.

Carlos: Yeah

Kaila: I don't understand—cuz I'm from here. I don't understand how ya'll live in that type of environment. Ya'll sneaking over here with no papers—uhhh—I'm not—I'm trying to say this in a non-offensive way.

Carlos: I know. I know. But like, it's not just Mexico. You know there're people from India, China, coming to this country.

Kaila: Well they coming to the country. Ya'll just ruining the type of environment that we in. I wouldn't understand that feeling cuz I'm from America. I mean what do you all want me to say?

Jaylen: You a racist, Kaila

Following the two heated conversations about immigration, I spoke with several of the YCfCers personally to get their reactions about Kaila's comments. Marco, another Latino male in the group, replied,

I kind of didn't like it but I'm not the kind of person to talk back. I'll just listen. I didn't really like it that she was saying that Hispanics ruin stuff. I've kind of heard that a lot. People say all Latinos ruin stuff and like it made me mad. Because other races think Hispanics come take other people's jobs. It's something I hear a lot. It's a stereotype. I don't think it's true.

Cherese: Do you think what she was saying was a typical opinion of students here?

Marco: No. That's just her.

I note two important consequences of the immigration discussions that contributed to improving relations between Blacks and Latino/as in the group. First, Kaila was brave enough to voice common misperceptions and arguments that circulate in the media about immigrants. Her comments obviously reflected stereotypes and popular media tropes about immigrants and her willingness to voice these concerns gave us an opportunity to place these issues on the table and deal with them collectively. Second, several Black YCfCers, though they didn't vehemently defend the Executive Order like Daniel and Carlos, verbally acknowledged that Kaila was wrong (Jaylen and others: You racist). They publically sided with Latino/a YCfCers in supporting the Executive Order and saying that they thought immigrants should be able to stay. Jaylen remarked, "If they make all the Hispanics leave, we can't have no more Takis and I love me some Takis."

Cameron exclaimed, “We got some fine Latinas at this school. You can’t send them back.” The shallowness of these comments in the face of such a serious topic produced collective laughter that diffused some of the tension that had accumulated. Third, the excerpts illustrated that although Black students shared school spaces with Latino/as, their lack of personal interaction produced, for some, both a lack of understanding and a lack of empathy for the cultural issues being faced by other communities of color. While most of the Latino/a YCfCers were US citizens, all of them had been affected by immigration issues in their families and communities. Finally, I would argue that conversations such as these would have rarely occurred outside of the YCfC, due to the lack of opportunity in classrooms for discussion and debate.

Tatum’s (2007) work in urban schools provided insight into the significance of the YCfCers’ dialogue about immigration. She suggested that “human connection requires familiarity and contact” (p. 100) and that “a connection depends on frankness and willingness to talk openly about issues of race” (p. 102). She then challenged educators to “think about how we can structure meaningful dialogue opportunities” (p. 102). Not only has the test-driven instruction of classrooms narrowed the curriculum and dictated what teachers have time and space to cover with students, it has also affected the mode of instruction—promoting more teacher-directed instruction and less opportunity for dialogue and discussion about complex ideas. Tatum (2007) asserted that in cultivating positive interracial relations in schools, “there is something else that is required, and that is the ability to navigate conflict” (p. 95). The excerpt above shows an example of students working through conflict. Kaila’s comments about immigration



were abrasive and seemed at odds with the fact that she had friends who identified as Latino/a. Her opinions also seemed to contrast with her position as *cultural bridge* in the YCfC, the term I use for students who led the way in reaching across differences to interact with other race/culture peers in the group. However, if we consider Tatum's thoughts about "frankness" and "willingness" to discuss potentially conflicting issues, the excerpt shows Kaila's struggle with ideas that she had few opportunities to understand. Further, I would suggest that her engagement with Carlos and Daniel seemed abrasive, rude, and disrespectful perhaps because she had had few opportunities to learn to communicate across difference—in some cases, her words failed her as she looked for the correct way to explain what she was trying to say. She stated, "uhhh—I'm not—I'm trying to say this in a non-offensive way" to which Carlos replies, "I know I know but like it's not just Mexico. You know there're people from India, China, coming to this country," as he earnestly tried to make her understand his perspective. Throughout the conversation, her mood changes from jokingly combative to frustrated contemplation as she struggled to understand. In our conversations about immigration, Kaila and others learned a great deal. Though I had observed Kaila with a multicultural group of friends, she shared with me that "she didn't talk about race stuff with her friends." Perhaps, the issues that Kaila raised during YCfC meetings were burning questions she possessed that she needed to have addressed—the YCfC provided the space to address these concerns. In these conversations, Kaila's (and perhaps others who sat there in silence) misperceptions about peers were challenged. They learned that not all of their Latino/a

peers were immigrants, they learned about concepts like “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and they learned about the shared struggles of people of color.

### **Influences of Stereotypes and Segregated Spaces**

Even though students at WV may have been seated in the same classrooms, this fact did not imply any degree of familiarity or contact with each other. Many of them existed in a segregated bubble of media-constructed Blackness or Latinaness with few opportunities to push back against stereotypical ideas about themselves and others. For example, two Black male students in particular, Larry and Gerald, were best friends and completed their individual interviews together. While some of the Black student interviews reflected a lack of understanding of the cultures of their Latino/a peers, Larry and Gerald’s interview reflected not only ignorance of others, but a lack of desire to change. I knew that WV students existed in segregated spaces, but the extent of Larry and Gerald’s segregation was surprising. Both had always attended predominately Black schools, had all Black social groups, lived in predominately Black neighborhoods, and had had little to no interaction with non-Black students. Also, their interviews were rife with stereotypes.

Larry: I was in the group when that girl and Carlos was talking about Mexicans. I didn’t even know why they were talking about that. I guess the Mexicans should stay where they supposed to be. There’s some cool Mexicans, but them ones that—I don’t know—They cool but they gotta go.

Cherese: Tell me why

Gerald: I don’t know. If you don’t got no paperwork, you might be carrying a disease or something. If they got a passport, they straight. If they [the government] tell you not to come illegally, then you gotta follow the rules.

Larry: If they don't have no passport, they taking over our space. We born here. It's like us going over there and taking your country. [pause] Wait, is it a lot of people here with no passport? You get deported. That mean they send you back? Wait—is Latino and Mexican the same?

Cherese: [I attempt to answer Larry's questions about immigration and deportation]

Cherese: Gerald, if you had a Latino friend would you think differently about immigration?

Gerald: Maybe. I don't have none though.

Cherese: Tell me adjectives you would use to describe different races or cultural groups of students

Gerald: Black people—funny, cool, down to earth, shoes, keep it real. Asians—Chinese food, [long pause], smart, karate—[laughs]. No don't put that. Latinos—different language, giving—um—sharing; they do share sometimes.

During the time that Larry and Gerald were in the YCfC, I did not witness any interaction between them and Latino/a YCfCers. While there were various reasons that students left the YCfC before the end of the year, I can only infer the reasons that Larry and Gerald left midway through the first semester. It could have been because of difficulty and discomfort with the intercultural/interracial relationships we were attempting to foster in the YCfC. As they mentioned in the excerpt above, they were at the meeting characterized by the heated discussion about immigration. While the ideas, clips, and discussions we had during meetings perhaps shifted perspectives for some YCfCers, they didn't seem to be as effective for others like Larry and Gerald.

Students who left the YCfC before the end of the year did so for a variety of reasons. On one hand it is possible that students who were most uncomfortable

interacting across difference left the group (i.e. White IB students, Black IB students, students who had no prior interaction with difference). It is likely that IB students left because they were either too busy with classes, felt that the group was too unstructured, or were bothered by the behaviors of others in the group. Others left for unstated reasons, but from analyzing their interviews, students like Larry and Gerald had few prior experiences with intercultural relations. In other cases, students such as Yenny, a long-term ESL student, decided to join the YCfC with her group of friends after some of our informal conversations about race relations at the school, but soon after stopped coming. Yenny described herself as being from a traditional Mexican family, had been in the ESL program for years, and was doing well in school. Yenny and I talked at length about the racial dynamics at the school including the segregation between Black and Latino/a students, and she had many thoughts to share that I felt would make her a valuable member of the YCfC. She and her friends attended one meeting and didn't return. While Yenny never shared with me her reasons for not returning, I believe that she, like other English language learners that I recruited, valued her time in the ESL enrichment class and did not want to miss out on this by coming to the YCfC. Though I doubt she needed the academic and language support of ESL enrichment, from an emotional perspective, the ESL class represented a comfortable, safe space for her, and she had a close bond with the ESL teacher. She did not want to sacrifice these relationships to join another group. Though students left the YCfC for various reasons, those who persisted made remarkable strides in their cross-cultural interaction as the year progressed.

### **Segregation to Bonding**

The YCfCers were a diverse, eclectic group of youth who were both similar and different in many ways. As I attempted to analyze data that would explain why some YCfCers stayed and some left, I found interesting patterns. Though YCfCers that stayed the entire year had social groups that were mostly segregated and homogeneous, many of them had had some prior experiences with interracial/intercultural interaction in elementary/middle school. Of the core group of 12 students, only four had been in Victoria all of their lives. Some had moved frequently and had already been to several other schools before coming to WV. All 12, with the exception of Diamond, had relatively small social circles at school, only identifying 1 or 2 close school friends. Four YCfCers out of the 12 students lived with both their biological parents; 5 lived with their mothers only, 2 lived with a stepparent, and 1 lived with his grandmother. With the exception of Diamond who was taking Honors courses, all were taking regular education courses, and of the 12, at least three were receiving services through the exceptional children's department for learning disabilities. Diamond was very active in school and worked a part time job; Jayanna was active in her church youth groups; others either worked after school or just went home. While it is difficult to ascertain each student's reasons for persisting in the YCfC the entire year, I suggest that students' remained because they enjoyed coming and the group fulfilled some need that they had at the time. For some that may have been developing new friendships, while for others that may have been the specialness of being active members of a school organization.

Although participants segregated themselves by race/culture and track during our initial meetings, and at first glance seemed to have thought very little about their identities, the students that persisted yearlong possessed a sense of openness that left them primed and ready for the activities and discussions that characterized our YCfC meetings. At first, despite the fact that I assigned students into diverse race/culture discussion groups during our meetings, they resegregated themselves. As time went on, students began to interact more—first the *cultural bridges*, like Ariana, Kaila, Jayanna, and Santiago, began interacting. Then, others followed along. Through social justice-oriented activities and team-building activities, YCfCers went from segregation to bonding. Although, I provided detail about the YCfC activities in the methodology section, below I highlight activities that seemed especially impactful in fostering learning and solidarity among students.

In November and throughout December, we began to focus on the YCfC projects that we would implement in the school. In November at the height of news coverage about Ferguson MI, there were students in the group who had not heard about the death of the unarmed Black teen. “Who’s Michael Brown?” I was asked by one of the Latino/a YCfCers. “Why don’t you know about Michael Brown?” replied another. We began studying these issues first on a national scale and then on a local scale because, much to the surprise of most YCfC members, a similar incident had also happened in their own community. Collaboratively, Black and Latino/a students decided that this was an issue facing both of their communities and decided to work on a project focused on raising awareness of WV teachers and students to issues of police brutality and

advocating for body cameras for officers in the city. Our research included reading and watching media about the issues in addition to having passionate discussions about our understandings and misunderstandings of the topics. Students then decided that they would write a letter and collect signatures to garner support for body cameras for officers. Appendix I shows the results of several group brainstorming sessions in which students generated ideas for the letter. Brainstorming focused on harmful, mainstream perceptions of Blacks and Latino/as, the truth about how students wanted to be characterized, and ideas for how they thought the problem of police brutality could be solved. Appendix J shows a final copy of the letter and petition they created.

During this time, students also worked in groups to create posters to place around the school to raise awareness to issues we had been discussing (Appendices K & L). These real world issues were timely, relevant, hot topics and students became very passionate about them. In addition to social issues, YCfCers also delved into the language of structural racism and oppression through media clips about privilege and oppression. Appendix M shows the results of students' responses to the media clip, "The Unequal Opportunity Race". This clip was especially profound for students as they discussed the obstacles facing them as youth of color, and ways that we as a collective could address those obstacles. Through these activities students began to understand their linked fate as people of color. Typically, students discussed ideas and I recorded their thoughts on the board. However, during the spring semester, as students began to take more ownership in the group, they occasionally both led and recorded their own ideas while I served as more of a facilitator. Appendix G shows the results of one of

these sessions in which YCfCers recorded their thoughts about why communities of color should be concerned about police brutality and ways they could address the issue.

Although our YCfC projects did not possess the depth and scope of many YPAR projects, learning and engagement did occur.

While we worked to learn more about social issues, we also focused heavily on building rapport and comradery among members of the group by interviewing partners, sharing music, poetry and art, playing team building games. Students stated that these activities were really meaningful because during this time they got to know things they didn't know about other cultures. I truly knew how far we had come when I reflected on our first two weeks of meeting—when students refused to eat the snacks I had brought, refused to work in groups or do any activities with each other, and would not share any information about themselves—including their names. In contrast, during our last meeting a few weeks ago, we were able to joke about those earlier, really awkward times. Through readings, discussions about social issues, raising awareness in school about issues facing Black and Brown communities, games, media clips, writing petition letters, and making posters, students' became more comfortable interacting with one another as their awareness was raised to issues affecting their communities and as they worked side by side to get the word out to others in the school about various issues.

### **Students Thoughts on Bonding**

The YCfC possessed what White (2001) calls “an array of voices” (p. 61). As I conducted final interviews with students, I sought to ascertain what components of the



YCfC experience had been most impactful in helping students think about interracial/intercultural relations and intersectional identities.

Cherese: One of the reasons I've been learning about youth of color is to study friendships and relationships. And I appreciate ya'll helping me study this. Tell me more about why students here choose same or different culture friends.

Kaila: I think that because people are mostly friends with people when they came from a certain school and they sit by a stranger and just say hello hi. They don't want to introduce themselves. That's mostly in 9th grade. When I came in 9th grade, I only knew like one person.

Ariana: I think that they sit with the same race, because they feel more comfortable talking—for us I sit with different people. But sometimes I just want to be with the Hispanics because I want to talk to them in Spanish. They'll probably understand more than [pause] other people. Because you can speak to them in Spanish

Jayanna: In same race groups, I guess they feel like they got more in common with a person—maybe. I have a diverse group.

Kaila: I get tired of Black people [everybody laughs] I just—it's like—I would get tired of certain Black kids in general—things like being loud—well I know I act loud and stuff, but I get tired when other people are like that

This excerpt shows three girls (1 Latina and 2 Black) discussing reasons that their peers may or may not have interracial/intercultural friendships. Interestingly, though Ariana and Jayanna both assert that they have diverse groups of friends, neither of them identified these friends in initial interviews. Jayanna had some diverse friends outside of school, but within school stated that she only socialized with her brother and his friends. Ariana, who described at length her previous experiences with a group of Black friends in middle school, stated initially that she mostly hung out with a couple Latino students. I propose two possible reasons for these discrepancies. First, it is possible that their friend

groups have shifted and/or expanded throughout the year as they've become more comfortable interacting across difference in the YCfC. Second, because of the amount of time they've spent in the YCfC, they may now count each other as friends. Also, it is important to note that the YCfCers still possessed stereotypical beliefs about Blacks (Blacks are loud—certain Blacks are loud) and Latinos (Latinos speak Spanish) and were still negotiating their understandings of fluid race/ethnic identities. For example, Daniel, like many students I encountered at the school, strongly identified as Hispanic, but struggled at times with the Spanish language and was much stronger communicating in English. As a result, he often shied away from interacting in solely Spanish speaking groups. As a YCfCer, Ariana had an opportunity to interact with Daniel, who she had not previously interacted with, perhaps due to their differing levels of comfort with Spanish. While I had observed that YCfCers were slowly beginning to interact interracially/interculturally, the focus group conducted towards the end of the spring semester provided key data about how students' perceived their interaction in the group. The following discussion occurred in response to my question about what they liked about participating in the YCfC.

Kaila: Ok so I liked everybody in the group. We all had this kind of bond, you know. I liked the honesty also. I liked how we mixed our cultures up and he [Francisco] taught me how to dance the bachata.

Santiago: Like what Kaila said the bonding moments--how we shared our views and talked about issues from the real world.

Cherese: What do you think changed between the beginning and the end as far as talking to people from other races or cultures? What's different now? Why's it easier to talk now— to talk to each other than it was at the beginning?

Ariana: Because everybody got comfortable talking to everybody

Daniel: Everybody adjusted

Cherese: What helped you to adjust? What was the biggest thing that contributed?

Daniel: Talking

Jayanna: Getting to know each other

Quinten: Candy!

Kaila: Getting to see each other more often

Santiago: Isolation

Cherese: What do you mean by isolation?

Santiago: We were in a small group.

Yet as I attempted to relinquish control of the classroom and increase student autonomy, I did so with the full realization of the risk involved. After months of guiding/pushing students toward completion of a full scale YPAR project, when I finally just asked YCfCers to decide if they even wanted to do YPAR, the consensus was a resounding, “no!” They said they preferred doing what we had been doing to prep for YPAR, learning about and discussing social issues and talking about individual and group positionality and identity. I reluctantly agreed and we proceeded with many thought-provoking and enriching activities that served to build solidarity, but stopped short of moving toward the type of action-oriented work that is common in YPAR projects. In data analysis, it became apparent that my nonhierarchical, allow-youth-to-govern-themselves approach was perceived by some YCfCers as a troublesome lack of

structure, and by others as a license to create chaos. During the final focus group, I gave students an opportunity to describe the things they would change in the future. Many of the student responses suggested that they needed more control and direction from me. In other words, they felt I should have just told them what to do, even if they did not want to do it instead of waiting for them to take the lead. These perspectives were in opposition to my desire to allow students more decision making and autonomy by creating a nonhierarchical environment. It is important to note, the students with whom I conducted the final focus group were *not* the IB students who early on perceived the lack of hierarchy as a problem. These were the students that were perceived by the IB students as unfocused. Even after most of the IB students left and I spent the entire year trying to encourage YCfCers to be calmer and more focused, they resisted until the end. Now at the focus group, looking back in reflection, they had shifted in their perceptions of their classroom behavior and desired for our group to be more orderly. In the next excerpt, students provide further detail to support the theme that they wanted to have accomplished more during our time together:

Kaila: I didn't like guests but it's ok.

Ariana: Yeah I didn't like them guests, but I liked everything I think—except the guests.

Cherese: Who are guests?

Santiago and Kaila: People that came in here

Diamond: Don't let nobody in there that don't wanna be in here. I understand it's enrichment but I guess the first thing we tried to accomplish was the diversity, bringing us together, conversation games and stuff, but if you were to come back

and to do what we set out to do, I would say be more selective because everybody comes here for a different reason.

Cherese: So you're saying we gotta weed out the people who aren't coming for the reasons that the group was formed for

Kaila: The ones that come for the candy

Diamond: Yeah

Ariana: Just be wise on who you choose. I know I'm loud. I know I'm one that don't really participate and stuff, but there's people that just come for the food and stuff. They don't participate. They just sit there and be on their phone and stuff. [everyone else nodding and concurring]

Cherese: That was a challenge I had because I didn't know anybody when I first came in.

Jayanna: Like they [Kaila and Ariana] were saying; they [students] like to come in there so they don't have to go do their work—if they had a class they didn't want to go to, then they come here because you know a lot of people don't have another class to go to.

Ariana: I know I invited some people but...

Daniel: I would have selected the individuals for the group

Kaila: That's not fair--this is enrichment—not a class

Daniel: Hey hey. I'm talking [jokingly]

Santiago: But there's DECA and they only choose certain people--like 10th and 11th graders

Cherese: So Santiago, you're saying that we should choose or let whoever in?

Santiago: Whoever

Kaila: Plus, we should have done the things we said we were going to do. And like make more posters, be more out there, do the protests that we wanted to do. Finish the letters that we never got to finish

Diamond: I liked the fact based part, how it was formed, how we could have used it. Our time we had—we didn't implement as much, but the things we did do and the fact that we got to have some conversations and got us talking about it—mixing us together. I disliked the lack of accomplishment that we did. We didn't get to do all of the things we had planned to do, but just the conversation and the platform was good.

Students' comments illuminate several important shifts that occurred throughout the year.

First, in stark contrast to previous attempts to encourage students to share their thoughts and opinions, during the final focus group, they engaged in discussions, offered their perspectives, disagreed with each other, and seriously considered the questions I asked.

Second, even though some of them started coming to the group as someone else's guest, at some point this shifted and by the end they viewed themselves as a cohesive group (I provide biographical sketches of the core group of participants in the Methods section).

As a result, additional outsiders were an unwelcome intrusion. Collectively, they all agreed that unwanted "guests" in the group were a hindrance to our progress. Third, even though all of the final focus group participants, perhaps with the exception of Diamond, were guilty of the offenses they cited as problematic (not focused on goals, being on cell phones, coming for food/candy), at some point their reasons for coming shifted and they began to take ownership in the group. Finally, although students voted not to do a formal YPAR project, upon reflection, they expressed regret that we were unable to complete the original plan. When I reminded them that they voted not to do it, Jayanna remarked, "You should have made us do it anyway". And her point was valid—it is possible that I could have structured the group differently, assumed more of a leadership role, tried to impose my will on students more than what I did. I could have tried harder to convince

them to do the YPAR project. However, if my goal was to truly foster student autonomy, then more time was needed—a year simply was not enough. The YCfCers were not ready, there wasn't adequate time to do all that I had hoped we could do, and a significant amount of *relational* prep work was necessary before the group was ready to work collaboratively on a full-scale YPAR project. Students needed to get to the point individually and collectively where they were ready to interact across their differences and that they saw the need for praxis—not because *I* wanted it, but because *they* wanted it. This desire for change happened organically and circuitously as they built solidarity as a group, became more comfortable interacting with one another, and became more aware of their individual and collective social struggles.

### **Conversations about Identity**

Final focus group data showed that YCfCers were beginning to think more complexly about their racial/cultural identities. In the excerpt below, Diamond responds to the question I posed to the focus group about why there was wide-spread segregation at the school:

You're gonna [naturally] identify with the African American culture. But different African-Americans hang out with Hispanics, Asians, Whites--they might not identify with their own culture. Like she [Kaila] said Black people sometimes get on her nerves. And we say it in a joking way but sometimes there are Black people who really don't identify with their people. But coming from IB and having to interact with the Asians, Indians and White kids just hearing how they talk to you—how they look at you.

Cherese: They talk to you in a good way or a bad way?

Diamond: What do you think? [shakes her head and frowns to denote bad]. The Black IB—we just hang out—It's like 10 of us that hang out on the weekends. I

don't identify with every Black student here. I'm not perfect. [pauses and looks at Daniel because he is talking while she is talking.] I don't agree with everything; like some kids that skip a lot or come to school to smoke weed. Things I think are really immature. That's within my own race. And other races might do it also. With the group I hang with we're more alike in a lot of ways scholastically. We work [jobs] and stuff. We have more in common--not saying if the skin color would be different it would be any different because if I identify with you, I identify with you. But someone's skin is going to attract you to them before you know who they are.

Diamond's response complicates the surface level picture of racial segregation at the school. First, she acknowledges that some Blacks don't identify with other Blacks, preferring to be around other ethnicity people. Second, she mentions negative racial experiences she had with Asians, Indians, and Whites in the IB program. In saying this, she suggests that Black IB students tend to gravitate towards each other because they are looked down upon by other race/ethnicity students in the IB program. Her comment is reminiscent of Principal Tower's assertion that some students were considered "not real IB" or not smart enough to be in IB courses. Although Diamond does not say this in this particular instance, her other comments suggest that this may be the case. Third, she describes that she feels a sense of commonality with her IB peers because of their scholastic similarities and acknowledges that she might feel commonality toward other race peers if it were not for the barrier that skin color differences erect between students. Diamond's comment that "Someone's skin is going to attract you to them before you know who they are," acknowledges the assumptions that she (and others) tend to make about their peers before getting to know them. In essence, Diamond seems to be saying that because of racial barriers, she may never get to know how much she has in common



with a different race/ethnicity peer. The YCfC afforded a select group of WV youth the opportunity to interact and befriend peers that they wouldn't otherwise have become acquainted with. In doing so, youth had the opportunity to think reflexively and complexly about how their identities influenced their relationships and build new strategies for interacting with others.

### **Creating Space for Youth Leadership**

In addition to encouraging students to step out of constrained, fixed identity boxes, the YCfC also provided an opportunity for students to develop as leaders. Tatum (2007) theorizes three critical components or “ABCs” of creating inclusive learning contexts: “Affirming identity,” “Building community”, and “Cultivating leadership” (p. 21-22). The activities and interactions in the YCfC included all three of these crucial parts of an inclusive learning context. We were intentional about coordinating activities that would affirm students’ individual racial/cultural identities and build awareness and appreciation of these identities throughout the group; we built community and solidarity through our investigation of issues facing communities of color; and the YCfC represented a place where students were urged to step into authentic leadership roles as they engaged with each other across difference.

In her work on critical pedagogical youth leadership, Steinberg (2014) outlined her philosophies about fostering authentic leadership roles for youth. She argued against the philosophy that youth must be “feared, controlled, contained” (p. 427). Also, she suggested that the failure to engage youth as authentic leaders results in “pseudo leadership roles,” (Steinberg, 2014, p. 429) which are prevalent in school environments

and simply give students the illusion of power and decision making. Within youth studies and critical youth studies, there is a wide range of beliefs about adult influence. While YPAR literature places emphasis on students' indigenous knowledge and should originate from the concerns of the students, it seems assumed and unstated in much of YPAR literature that adult managers lead the group, facilitate instruction for students, and lead youth to critical consciousness. Particularly in YPAR that occurs in school environments, there seems to be a stronger element of teacher control in which students may come uncomfortably close to what Steinberg calls "pseudo leadership roles" (p. 429).

In work by Debbie Sonu (2009) at a social justice themed high school, she critiqued the institutionalization of activism and social justice and asked, "How does activism get produced when dealt the full force of disciplinary schooling practices?" (p. 91). Similar to theories that I used to frame the research at WV, Sonu (2009) referenced both critical and poststructural work to unravel how students "contest, affirm, ignore, and embrace the uptake of social action within the institution of schooling" (p. 91). She concluded that, "teachers need to allow students to decide, or realize, within their own contexts and through their own histories, their agentic role in the changing world, knowing that such endeavors are always unpredictable and impossible to deliberately teach" (p. 102). In creating the YCfC, while I sought to assume the role of facilitator and teacher in helping students learn about changing their social worlds, it was indeed unpredictable. I desired to meet students as equals and encouraged them to take ownership in the group *with me*.

While the concept of allowing youth to lead sounded interesting and thought-provoking on paper, to actually initiate this ideology in the context of the YCfC was at times daunting. Throughout the process, I continued to believe in the potential of an authentic and transformative youth studies pedagogy, but it was incredibly precarious and time consuming—a year may not have been enough. In order to be both leader and follower, I was forced, at times, to place my research agenda, research goals, and adult perspectives on the back burner. Although I came into the research site with a specific plan of guiding youth through a full scale YPAR project, at the same time, I planned to guide them to step up as leaders in the group. Though these two goals were compatible in the planning stages of research, in practice with youth in the YCfC, I found these goals much more difficult to actually implement. I quickly realized that if I was serious about foregrounding students' concerns and perspectives, I would have to consider forgoing a full-scale YPAR project. Teasing out the nuances of this process represented an important and often missing story in descriptions of research with/on/for youth.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

My year spent with the YCfCers spoke volumes about the challenges, pitfalls, and rewards of attempting to engage students in YPAR in an educational context. The data collected during the YCfC presents a picture of a group of youth who explored social issues facing their community, learned to think critically about their linked fate as youth of color, and began to explore their fluid identities. An analysis of youth identities and interracial/intercultural relations in the YCfC provides an opportunity to expand critical race theories about racial/cultural identity. Critical race theory literature speaks of

balancing antiessentialism with the *voice of color* thesis. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) described that these two concepts exist in an uneasy tension. To briefly explain, the *voice of color* thesis holds that people of color, though they may experience racism and discrimination differently, can speak back to racism in unity as marginalized and disenfranchised people. Yet, this notion must be balanced with antiessentialism or the recognition of the fluidity of racial/cultural identities, and the social constructedness of racial differences. In historical movements in which people of color came together for change, there was an assumption that people of color could speak as one collective “voice” because they shared similar experiences of racial/ethnic oppression. Yet, through the lens of antiessentialism, theorists acknowledge the vast complexity, messiness, and slipperiness (Harris & Espinoza, 1997) of trying to define individuals according to their race/culture. At the onset of this project, I questioned whether youth would have to shift fixed ideas about their identities in order to work in solidarity with other race/culture peers. I wondered whether YCfCers would have to view their Blackness or Latino/a-ness in more fluid ways in order to understand, empathize, and feel linked to another communities’ struggles that may have been similar yet different from their own. I am reluctant to argue that data collected at WV provides an answer to these questions, but it does shed light on the process by which a particular group of students went from race/culture segregation to bonding.

First, while YCfCers acknowledged the existence of racial/cultural segregation at the school and identified their racial/cultural cliques, observation and interview data showed that race may *not* have been the most salient part of students’ identities at all

times. If race had been most salient for students, the Black IB might have aligned themselves more readily with Black regular ed. students in the YCfC. Instead, social class and academic track differences were too broad to overcome. Many students identified more strongly with their academic track affiliation and only associated with other students of similar track and class. Also, by the end of the YCfC data collection, some YCfCers had built closer bonds with different race/ethnicity peers in the group because of similarities in interests or experiences.

Second, I would argue that the school environment offered few opportunities for students to think about social justice issues and their places in the social world. Instead, the environment often worked to place them in stereotypical, restrictive identity boxes. By illuminating ideas about identity, race, and activism within the YCfC, youth began to think more critically about themselves, their communities, and subsequently about others' communities. The YCfC provided space and opportunity for students' fluid, complex identities to flourish. YCfC provided an environment that was club based, student-led, a part of the school context, and a space where students could explore new ways of thinking about themselves and each other.

Third, students not only crossed race/ethnic group barriers through interracial/intercultural interaction, they also engaged in rich learning experiences about their same race/ethnicity peers. In other words, Latino/a students in the group also formed stronger bonds with Latino/a peers and Black students formed stronger bonds with Black peers through YCfC work. Data collected from the YCfC provides valuable insight on promoting racial/ethnic group identity and solidarity while still fostering

interracial/interethnic alliances between youth of color. Given time and space to ponder and dialogue, YCfCers learned to give voice to the struggles and obstacles facing communities of color.

Fourth, I argue that segregation and negative intercultural/interracial relations represent societal issues that draw their energy and fuel from the pervasive negative representations of people of color. These negative conceptualizations, which live in the historical memories and the fabric of our society, were passed down to youth through stories, media, cultural scripts, and negative interactions with difference. These deficit ways of viewing youth of color function to isolate, divide, and control youth. I encouraged YCfCers to view the beauty of their commonalities and differences and the ways in which they possessed agency to decide how they would be defined.

## **CHAPTER VII**

### **CONCLUSION: PAR, IDENTITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS**

In this dissertation, I use a critical feminist frame to explore the interracial/intercultural relations among youth of color in an urban high school. In designing, conducting, and analyzing data from this project, I utilized both critical and poststructural approaches in exploring youth relations. I drew on Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), people of color feminisms (multiracial feminism/queer people of color theories/ borderlands theory), and critical youth studies as theoretical underpinnings to think through the project. I viewed the boundaries between these various theoretical traditions as blurred and overlapping. These theories enabled me to highlight the ways that institutional and social structures at the school influenced youth of color identity and relations, while simultaneously exploring youth resistance and rebellion to adult managers as well as their potential for social agency and change. There were three research questions that guided this work: 1) How do critically-oriented activities and collaborative interaction influence relationships among youth of color from differing racial/cultural groups? 2) What is the relationship between youth of color's notions of self/other and their relationships with other race/ethnicity peers? 3) What are the lived experiences of youth of color navigating interracial/intercultural relations in an urban school? Data from the year-long ethnography of WVHS consisted of individual interviews with youth, over 100 hours of school-wide observations, over 50 hours of

contact with the YPAR group, artifacts, and a final focus group. In addition to the primary data collection, individual interviews with teachers and administrators at the school were critically important in painting a picture of both youth agency and the influences of school social structures on youth interaction. In the WV project, as students navigated their urban school environment, I documented how they explored their linked fate as youth of color and negotiated their racial/cultural, gender, language, and academic track differences. The YCfC gave youth a space to perform their fluid racial/cultural/linguistic identities while raising their consciousness to issues facing their communities. Below, I summarize broad themes as they relate to the three research questions. However, similar to many ethnographies, analysis of data from WV produced many more questions for further exploration than definitive answers or solutions. Thus, throughout the sections below, I raise questions for further study and research.

### **Youth of Color Lived Experiences in Urban Schools**

In designing and implementing this project, I desired to know, “What are the lived experiences of youth of color navigating interracial/intercultural relations in an urban school?” An ethnographic approach was used to describe the WV environment and provide a more nuanced, contextualized understanding of the structural, institutional, and social influences on youth social group choices, and their relationships with each other and with their teachers. In exploring students’ lived experiences, I focused on students’ segregated relations as well as student/teacher relationships at WV.

A critical race theory (CRT) theoretical lens enabled me to examine the past and present racial dynamics that influenced school climate at WV. In line with Yosso’s



(2005) definition, a CRT lens highlighted the ways that “race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact[ed] school structures, practices, and discourse” (p. 70). It became obvious that race played a role in students’ experiences at WV from the demographic shift that had occurred at the school, to the teacher and administrator turnover that ensued, to racial incidents that youth described between WV and rival school Magon. Analysis of WV showed layers of segregation—students at the school segregated themselves and the school was a predominately people of color school due to the resegregation occurring throughout the city. In some ways, the race and social class segregation within the school mirrored the overall segregation in the city of Victoria. Further, WV students of color from different racial/cultural groups attended the same classes but knew very little about each other. Their segregation and lack of contact, both within classrooms and social spaces, promoted a sort of passivity in that there were no volatile racial issues—only a sort of wariness and indifference toward each other. In contrast to this, the YCfC produced a different reality. In bringing students together in one space and asking them to interact, we created an environment that was much more contentious in many ways than what I observed in the school at large. There were contentions and power struggles in students’ interaction with me, in their disagreements with each other, and in their initial refusal to collaborate with one another. LatCrit scholars suggest that a lack of complexity and nuance in discussions of racial issues that only serve the interests of those at the top of race hierarchies (Espinoza & Harris, 1997; Best, 2007). When applied to the WV context, this suggests that ignoring, suppressing, or looking over racial segregation in schools may have worked to suppress students’

complex emotions around these topics and produce compliance and passivity (Goldsmith, 2004)—which all functioned to preserve the status quo. Race and academic track segregation at WV kept students blinded, in some ways, to inequalities; prevented them from asking difficult questions about why things were as they were; and prevented them from banding together to demand radical change. According to Harris's (2009) conceptualization of *everyday multiculturalism*, when youth are given the opportunity to interact, they discover ways to address ethnic disputes and problems. Yet Harris contends that adults attempt to manage youth and force them into a false tolerance of each other to promote overall compliance, artificial racial harmony, and to control youth perspectives. An analysis of WV students' lived experiences showed that many of them lacked sufficient opportunities to work out the particulars of their everyday multiculturalism because of academic and social structures at the school that prevented interaction including tracking, excessive teacher-directed instruction, and long-held traditions that fostered narrowly-defined social cliques.

Data collected at WV around students' lived experiences held many implications for teacher/student relations as well. If we consider the successes and pitfalls of the YCfC as a model for other educators interested in beginning school YPAR/social justice/interracial/intercultural groups, then student/teacher relations become critically important. Also, even in a typical school classroom, if teachers fail to understand complex struggles faced by communities of color, then it will be difficult for them to make space in classrooms to facilitate dialogue and discussion of these issues with their students. In the YCfC, we intentionally attempted to create a multilingual, multidialectal,

multiracial, multicultural space in which students could begin to step out of the segregated identity boxes that seemed to be the norm throughout the school. In the excerpt below, I provide an excerpt from my reflections on an incident in which Daniel, a Latino YCfCer, used a feature from AAVE and a white, female teacher at the school who just happened to be in room corrected him in front of the group. In doing so, she devalued his linguistic and cultural expression and showed open disrespect for his attempt to communicate with me and his peers.

After weeks of trying to get students to talk, we were having a heated discussion about issues facing communities of color, and one of the WV English teachers happened to come in to make copies (this happened frequently; they didn't seem to think the noisy copy machine would bother us). She listened quietly for a moment and then interrupted Daniel's explanation to correct his grammar. He was obviously irritated, said "okay whatever", and kept talking. She smiled at me like we were coconspirators and walked out of the room. For some reason, this incident completely shocked me. I guess I didn't expect this at a school where AAVE was common. I wondered how many of these microaggressions students experienced throughout the day—opportunities that well-intentioned adults took to demean students' language and culture. The teacher showed her lack of cultural sensitivity, lack of understanding, and lack of appreciation for the various ways of speaking English. What she didn't understand was that this student was a better communicator than she was. I had heard him speak standard English, AAVE, and Spanish—though Spanish wasn't easy for him because he had been immersed in English-only educational environments his entire life. Her comment was elitist, ignorant, and demeaning. My big regret is that instead of responding to her, I "let it ride" and didn't defend Daniel. I said, "Go ahead and finish your point Daniel. Hopefully we won't have any more interruptions" --Cherese's Journal Reflection

In analyzing this incident between Daniel and Mrs. Clark, the interrupting teacher, I reference Wallace and Chuon's (2014) work on "being known." In their research on students of color in urban schools, Wallace and Chuon (2014) explored students' desire to be "known" by their teachers.

Feeling known is a critical aspect of teacher care, because when an adolescent perceives that a teacher “knows me,” this signals that the identities being ascribed to the student via experiencing the classroom environment are coherent with the deeply personal, evolving identities that students hold. At the same time, when an adolescent perceives that the teacher “doesn’t know me,” this signifies a lack of teacher care and opportunities for engagement and learning are significantly diminished (p. 941-942)

Wallace and Chuon (2014) go on to describe that students’ perceptions of feeling authentically known by teachers “mitigate[s] context-specific stressors—often related to identity and social stigma—experienced by marginalized youth” (p. 941). The situation between Ms. Clark and Daniel exemplified many of the problems I witnessed in race relationships at the school. First, although she didn’t know Daniel personally, she obviously felt that her privilege as a teacher, adult, and expert in English pedagogy gave her the *right* to tell him that he was wrong in what he said. Similarly, teachers at WV frequently exercised their power over students to police their behavior and silence them without listening to their perspectives, and these same teachers frequently had the most difficult classes because students rebelled and resisted. For many of these teachers their efforts to “know” their students was limited to categorizing them according to their race/culture boxes.

In contrast, other teachers spent time and energy building rapport with students, getting to know them, and listening to their thoughts and opinions. I witnessed many of these individuals throughout the school. One in particular that exemplified Wallace and Chuon’s idea of making students feel “known” was the ESL teacher at WV, a Black woman born in the Caribbean who had spent years in corporate America before switching careers to become an ESL teacher. Although she didn’t speak Spanish, Burmese,

Haitian, or any of the other languages of the students she frequently interacted with, she had developed an amazing rapport with them. She was quick to grab another student from the hallway to translate for her when necessary. Students trusted her, felt that she understood them, and knew that she accepted them and saw their strengths; in essence, she was her students' biggest cheerleader. They frequently stopped by her classroom to hug her, to share good news, or to report about what was going on in their families. She had a stern classroom persona and students viewed her as a no-nonsense teacher, but she was loving, was an excellent listener and was known to be an advocate for her students. I argue that the ESL teacher's rapport with students was very effective in "mitigate[ing] context-specific stressors" (p. 941) at WV—an environment where students had to negotiate various race, culture, and language issues as well as their own shifting identities as youth. The WV ethnography illuminated the importance of change projects that disrupt the tenuous relations that exist among students of color as well as between some students and their teachers. In summary, an exploration into students' lived experiences and their relationships with their teachers was not the initial focus of this ethnography. However, as I began to understand students' identities and delve into the complex interracial/intercultural relations at the school, I began to view the connections between the school climate, school history, student identities, and student/teacher relationships and the overall race, class, and track relations at the school.

## **Collaboration and Interracial/Intercultural Relationships**

At the onset of this project I asked, “How do critically-oriented activities and collaborative interaction influence relationships among youth of color from differing racial/cultural groups?” Analysis of observations and interview data from YCfCers illuminated the influence of collaborative social justice-focused groups in fostering better youth relations, showed the importance of *cultural bridges* in interracial/intercultural groups, and highlighted the difficulties of bridging social class/academic track barriers at WV.

As I described in detail in Chapter 2, studies of contact and interaction have often focused on single identity dimensions of participants—namely racial differences—been conducted with adults, and offered analysis based solely on survey data of youth (Quillian & Campbell, 2003; Gay, 2004/2006, Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011). Data collected in the WV study contributes to previous research on youth interracial relations by highlighting students’ thoughts and perspectives about navigating race/class/gender/academic track differences with peers. Also, the WV project provided insightful data about potential influences of school structures and single-identity cliques on student interracial/intercultural relations. Interactions in the YCfC disrupted narratives of segregation and contributed to literature on interracial/intercultural conflict by showing a picture of how a group of students learned to collaborate through their differences. Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright (2008) described that through critical lenses, youth might “unlearn their stereotypical knowledge of race and other social oppressions” (p. 25). More specifically, I argue that the YCfC experiences allowed

youth a space to think critically about their school and community environment, their agency in effecting change in the world, and their investment in caring about the concerns of other communities of color. Though critical youth scholars sometimes focus heavily on social structures of oppression, the WV data also highlighted the importance of providing spaces for students to explore and question the aspects of their identities that have been essentialized, commodified, or stifled by oppressive structures at the school—in doing so, students begin to think of themselves in new ways as they allow themselves to bloom and flourish. The YCfC provided the space for students to explore who they were in relation to each other. Although there was insufficient time for the YCfC to fully develop and there were long lists of items that I desired to achieve with the YCfC, especially related to the YPAR project, that simply did not happen, there were several achievements related to youth agency and interracial/intercultural engagement. The YCfC experience gave youth the opportunity to lead, fostered more egalitarian teacher/student relationships, encouraged students to interact through their race/culture differences, and cultivated an atmosphere of free expression. I possessed a great deal of control over the topics we discussed, but topics also emerged organically from my observations at WV and YCfC group conversations about social issues that were occurring in the community and around the world at the time of data collection. The YCfC disrupted the banking method of education (Freire, 1970) by putting forth an experimental project in which we deliberately sought *not* to be school-like. YCfCers began to think more critically about who they were, who their peers were, and why they should care about their communities and each other. The YCfC bridged the

social/communal and the individual in an attempt to make the topics we discussed relevant to students' lives.

Although participants segregated themselves by race/culture and track during our initial meetings, and at first glance seemed to have thought very little about their identities, the students that persisted yearlong possessed a sense of openness that left them primed and ready for the activities and discussions that characterized our YCfC meetings. The group consisted of an eclectic mix of students with different personalities and strengths. While Diamond had navigated in various academic circles and could speak very complexly about the inequalities at the school, she navigated in predominately Black social circles, Black/White academic circles, and had very few experiences with non-Black youth of color. Others in the group, such as Ariana, Cameron, and Kaila had experienced positive friendships with people of color who were racially different than them in the past, and although their current social circles were not diverse (with the exception of Kaila), I would argue that these prior experiences made them better able to serve as cultural bridges in the YCfC group. Ariana, Cameron, and Kaila served as cultural bridges and were crucial in fostering solidarity in the group. At the onset of this project, I desired to know how an exploration into youth relationships might contribute to better understandings of the tension between antiessentialism and strategic essentialism for purposes of coalition-building and solidarity between groups. I would argue that the behaviors of the YCfC cultural bridges reflected the idea of strategic essentialism (Spivak & Harasym, 1990) in the way that they fostered interaction in the group. While feminist scholars have deconstructed and troubled identity categories and fought to view



individuals in antiessentialist ways, many have also recognized the importance of cultivating fluid forms of identity politics or *strategic essentialism* for the purpose of leveraging political or social change through solidarity with others. Yet, I would argue that there are limited models for ways to enact strategic essentialism in practice. During our short time together, YCfCers, though they possessed many differences, learned to embrace the concerns of other students of color in the group, some codeswitched, and some performed various social identities. In doing so, they provide a model of how they performed strategic essentialism in ways that allowed them to reach out to peers to foster solidarity in the group, while still being retaining their own identities, thoughts, and concerns.

While I entered this project with an intersectional lens, the degree of conflict between IB and regular ed. Black youth was unanticipated. I pondered, “What does it mean that Black YCfCers presumably bonded more successfully across racial differences than class differences with students of the same race?” Blacks and Latinos were in class together, so perhaps it was easier for them to interact, but school wide observations did not reflect that much interaction was occurring. From my positionality as a Black female who grew up in a blue collar family, social class was important, but race superseded all. I grew up in the era and in a region of the country where, particularly when engaged in academic and school-related activities, there were so few Blacks, that in a crowd of people, one immediately gravitated towards other Blacks for support. Some Latino/a students at WV seemed to operate in similar ways. Yet Black students at WV, having grown up in the urban, multicultural city of Victoria, had likely never been in an

environment where they shared my experiences of being in the minority; therefore, class differences were perhaps more salient for them than for me as an adolescent.

Interestingly, with both Black and Latino/a YCfCers, social class was hidden and silent throughout the entire study. Students seemed to lack the language to articulate what social class signified for them, and instead used academic track as a marker for this.

I suggest that Black and Latino/a YCfCers bonded more readily for two main reasons. First, I entered the research space with activities and learning experience that were intended to foster racial/cultural bonds. The prominence of social class and academic track differences between Blacks at the school was unanticipated and by the time that I began to address the issue within our weekly meetings, IB students had already become frustrated and decided to leave. Secondly, Black and Latino/a students were segregated and had little interaction, but they did share the same classroom spaces—unlike the Black regular ed. and IB students. Even though there was some diversity in the IB program, and there were middle class students in regular ed. classes, by and large the IB program represented the white middle class. For students who were not middle class or White, their status as IB afforded them a certain degree of privilege in the school environment. Particularly for students of color in IB, they had found a place of privilege among the white middle class because of their ability to qualify for IB. In general, IB students were treated differently by teachers and held a place of status and esteem within the school. In a capitalist economy students' bodies are representative of their future value as workers. Thus, school social structures, in mirroring and reproducing societal inequalities, constructed hierarchies that held IB, honors, and well-

behaved students in higher esteem, perhaps, because these students represented higher potential as future middle class workers. At WV and at other similar school environments, certain school structures had effectively divided and segregated students according to their future work potential (Anyon, 1980). Being IB meant much more than simply being in a position of status at WV; it signified future success, a higher likelihood of future social class privilege, career status, and increased social capital. For IB students of color, being classified as IB was integrally linked with the “politics of respectability” (Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001), particularly in the ways in which the “Black IB” related to their regular ed. peers. While Latino/a YCfCers were mostly ignored by the Black IB YCfCers that initially joined the group, the regular ed. Black YCfCers represented a source of frustration and embarrassment for their Black IB peers. Their behaviors perhaps reminded middle class and aspiring middle class Black IBers of the life that they wanted to escape and of the “ratchedness” from which they wanted to remove themselves. The idea that for youth of color at WV, interracial/intercultural interaction was more palatable than interacting across their class differences with their same race peers was a notable finding.

### **Youth of Color Identity and Relationships**

At the onset of this project, I also asked, “What is the relationship between youth of color’s notions of self/other and their relationships with other race/ethnicity peers?” YCfCers developed a greater awareness of systems of oppression as well as a more nuanced understanding of self and other. Fluidity in identity is far from a new concept. As I referenced in Chapters 1 and 2, this project was informed by E. Johnson’s (2001)

critique of *single variable politics*, Muñoz (1999/2000) and Alarcón's (1996) concepts of *identities-in-difference*, and White's (2001) critique of black feminisms' failure to deal with class differences just to name a few. This ethnography places discussions of identity within scholarship about urban youth navigating intersections of not only race, class, and gender identities, but also language and age. Data from the YCfC expands concepts of intersectional and fluid identities by merging theory with praxis in a model of youth engaged in social justice and crossracial/crosscultural communication. In highlighting how students navigated identity issues, I sought to bridge urban school literature with critical and poststructural feminist literature in showing how students simultaneously embraced and pushed back against binaries and institutional structures.

Data analysis also led me to question: What do fluid identities have to do with interracial/intercultural relations? School cliques were not only based on students identifying with a single identity, but also many of the cliques reflected deficit-based, flat, and stereotypical versions of the complex persons that students were. For example, if students were solely identified in a group because of their racial categorization, they may not have had sufficient opportunities to explore, perform, and enact other parts of themselves. Interacting with ideas about an embodiment of difference—race/culture, social class, gender, and sexuality—in the YCfC allowed students to explore aspects of themselves that they perhaps had not previously thought of—which in turn could have opened up new parts of their identities. Youth in the group perhaps experienced what Anzaldúa (2012) called internal *choques* or struggles to negotiate understandings of self as they navigated external *choques*, or struggles to negotiate relations with others. Also,

Lorde (1984) theorizes that individuals possess limited models for interacting across our differences because of a patriarchal, oppressive, and hierarchical society. For example, in the YCfC Ariana could shift languages and perform various personas at any time and the fact that she possessed these abilities was both encouraged and accepted by me and her peers in the group. In the final focus group, Ariana shared her beliefs about privileging English and not mixing languages even in groups where some friends might be bilingual, yet wanting to be around Hispanics sometimes to be able to speak Spanish. In the YCfC, she did not have to choose. She could blend various personalities and perform various aspects of herself in one space.

### **Negotiating Power as a Researcher**

Throughout the research process, I attempted to be critically reflexive in navigating issues of power that arose in the research space. In conducting a study on community building, Bettez (2014) theorizes about the importance of critical reflexivity in qualitative research,

Self-reflexivity returns to the enmeshment of relationships between the researcher and the self, the researcher and the participant(-researcher)s and the researcher and the readers. I am beholden to be cognizant of how I might be holding on to power in ways that hinder communion with participants/co-researchers; however, we, as a collective of co-researchers, need to be thoughtful about what we might be withholding from our readers by not delving more deeply into what factors may have hindered our community building. (p. 943)

Similar to what Bettez describes in her quote, although I entered this project with goals of engaging students in a PAR project that would foster positive interracial/intercultural relations, critical reflexivity demands that I ask particular questions about my role in the

research process, my relationships with participants, my investments in this research, and of my data analysis. While I continue to believe in the potential of PAR as a transformative force in crossing racial/cultural divides in urban schools, my critical reflexivity forces me to question, *What happens when radical projects like critical youth studies PAR are institutionalized? What might be the consequences of teaching dangerously transgressive, critical ideas to students within the confines of a school environment? Are teachers/adult managers ready to concede some of their power and control to students attempting to grow as leaders? Are teachers and administrators ready to manage the conflicts that will likely arise as students begin to interact across racial/cultural lines?* Even in research on/with youth that purports to be critical, adults maintain control over the research process and there is little description of the power struggles, obstacles, and stumbling blocks that ensue as adults and youth negotiate power in forming youth groups. Although there are notable exceptions that speak of the messiness of youth coalitions (see Torre & Fine's 2008 work on the contact zone in YPAR), many scholars portray YPAR as a near perfect picture of youth of color working together harmoniously toward a social justice project, with few problems, and in solidarity with each other and their adult teachers/facilitators. As I've described, creating and sustaining the YCfC with a diverse group of youth was fraught with uncertainty, power struggles, and misunderstandings; building rapport with youth can be an arduous task. If the IB YCfCers had stayed in the group, we would have likely implemented a full PAR project, still ignited students' passions about social justice, and cultivated a less problematic and contentious learning environment in the process; however, it is difficult

to predict whether or not the same Latino/a participants would have remained, which would have made an analysis of interracial/intercultural relations near impossible. I would argue that the YCfCers that remained offered rich, complex perspectives from a population of youth whose voices are frequently silenced in the school environment. From a practical and methodological standpoint, scholars who desire to implement a YPAR curriculum, particularly one within a school environment, have limited models for understanding the specifics of engaging youth across racial/cultural differences, the challenges of navigating power dynamics, the importance of addressing the academic skills necessary for youth to access YPAR content, and the strategies for fostering the types of critical skills needed to think in complex and nuanced ways about identity and social structures. I will continue to emphasize the wealth of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that students of color brought to the YCfC, but the process, ease, and fluency with which some youth expressed these ideas had been detrimentally influenced by the type of education they had received. For some YCfCers, particularly those who had been educated in advanced academic tracks, tackling a poem or discussing a video about social justice was stimulating and refreshing—the topic may have been unfamiliar, but they were well-versed in skills of comprehension, synthesis, and analysis. For other students, some of whom struggled with reading comprehension or had learning disabilities, attempting to navigate unfamiliar reading material and analysis about that material may have felt daunting and too much like the frustration some of them experienced in their content classes on a daily basis. As a result, some simply refused to do certain activities. Although Anyon's (1980) research on the hidden curriculum of work was conducted in

the late 1970s, after three decades of school reform, the education of students of color and the poor continues to reflect Anyon's description of working class schools in her study. In many ways YCfCers had existed in such race/cultural and track segregation, that some of them were unaware of the differences in the ways their peers were being educated. Although some YCfCers struggled with tasks that required creativity, leadership, and critical thinking, I would argue that they were fully capable of all of these, but had encountered limited opportunities in their schooling to hone and cultivate these crucial skills.

Scholar practitioners committed to engaging youth in PAR must think carefully about best practices for building academic competencies and negotiating academic differences among youth, while still fostering a positive environment characterized by mutual respect—not only for race/class, gender, and language differences, but also for differences in academic abilities. With data from the YCfC, I attempt to begin some of these conversations that should be further explored in future PAR studies. Further research is needed to determine whether the YCfC model could be implemented in a typical classroom setting. Yet, the philosophy behind the YCfC model holds many implications for fostering better interracial/intercultural relationships and cultivating learning experiences that engage students in thinking about change and social justice.

In many ways, the YCfC offered a model of an adult conceding power to students so that they might better engage cross culturally with one another. While researchers have used YPAR as a primary research methodology, in this study, the participatory action research process was intended to represent a part of the *intervention* that would be



used to shape student relations. Yet, to call the YPAR activities an *intervention* in this research was perhaps a misnomer. Very little about this project implied a direct, linear, causal way of looking at research. Instead several components interacted dialogically throughout the research process: interracial/intercultural relationships, YCfC activities that fostered collaboration, and topics that stimulated students' thinking about their potential to transform their environments. The topics we engaged were more powerful because of our efforts to build bridges and collaborate across difference; our efforts at collaboration and interracial/intercultural relationships were ignited, energized, and strengthened by the topics we learned about; our attempts at collaboration through PAR created bonds that made interracial/intercultural relationships better.

### **Implications for Future Research and Practice**

In attempting to work through the nuances of antiessentialism and strategic essentialism in building solidarity across differences, various questions have been raised: If we highlight all of our differences and view our identities as fluid, on which identity markers do we build coalitions? On which issues do we coalesce? How do we build solidarities across so many differences? Interracial/intercultural coalitions that rest solely on single identity based understandings of self/other function to marginalize and divide individuals that possess more fluid understandings of identity. As a result, efforts at transformative change remain elusive. I would argue that the YCfC showed a model of solidarity that was not based on a falsely imposed tolerance of one another or single-identity politics. The YCfCers showed that race/culture, class, and academic track identities, though salient and powerful, are not fixed and immutable. We began to shift

and change through our discourse and interactions with one another. The YCfCers were both similar and different in various ways, yet they moved from segregation to a willingness to listen to one another and a desire to understand. YCfCers showed that youth of color are willing to form bridges across their differences, albeit in their own ways and on their own terms.

I position this research within a long tradition of feminist ethnography that combines an activist stance with the desire to illuminate the perspectives of the marginalized and disenfranchised. In arguing why feminist research matters, Michelle Fine (1992) writes: “If feminist researchers do not take critical, activist, and open stances in our own work, then we collude in reproducing social silences” (p. 206). Throughout the various iterations of this dissertation project, I felt compelled to justify why a project about student interracial/intercultural relations and student identities matters within educational research. In the current era of a hyper focus on testing, large scale data, and value added measures for teachers, education rhetoric seems to be moving closer to reductionist, one-size-fits-all approaches and further away from in-depth, contextual understandings of educational issues. This dissertation project produced important insights about youth identity and interracial/intercultural relations and the results hold implications for both theory and practice. The results of this dissertation raise important questions about the role of PAR and social justice education in school spaces; inform research on fostering fluid identities among youth of color; provide data about the role of emancipatory experiences in fostering better interracial/intercultural relations among youth; yield fertile ground for theorizing about the role of interracial/intercultural

coalitions in fostering advocacy; raise important questions about the consequences of academic tracking; and examines the potential for breaking down hierarchical relationships between students and teachers. Based on the ideals of critical race and feminist research, this project served as a reminder of the rich, complex, and valuable voices and perspectives of those most marginalized in educational environments. By intentionally centering the voices of youth of color—particular those dealing with forces that sought to control their minds and bodies and dictate to them who they should be—I suggest that stories of my time with the YCfC provide models for ways that teachers and administrators might intervene to disrupt the status quo of segregation, hierarchies, and deficit thinking in schools.

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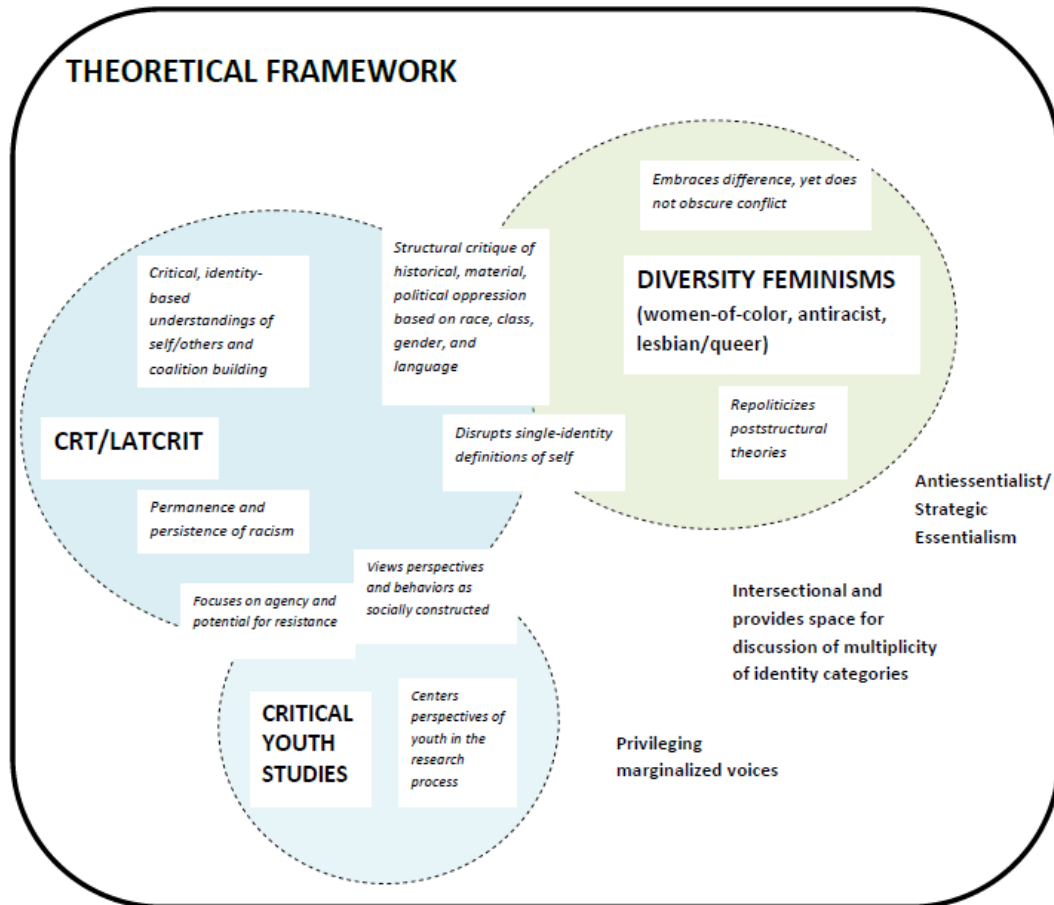
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**APPENDIX A**

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**





## APPENDIX B

### YOUTH COALITION FOR CHANGE STUDENT ROSTER

Pseudonym	Grade	Race/ethnicity (reported by participant)	Academic Track	Duration in YCFC
<b>Shawn</b>	9	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Quinten</b>	9	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Diamond</b>	11	Blck	Former IB	yearlong
<b>Jaylen</b>	10	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Jayanna</b>	9	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Kaila</b>	10	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
Regena	9	Blck&Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Cameron</b>	10	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Daniel</b>	10	Blck	Regular ed.	yearlong
Isabella	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Santiago</b>	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
Sara	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
Manuel	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Ariana</b>	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
<b>Mari</b>	10	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	yearlong
Larry	12	Black	Regular ed.	fall semester
Gerald	12	Black	Regular ed.	fall semester
Taraji	10	Black	Regular ed.	fall semester
Carlos	12	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	fall semester
Marco	12	Hisp/Latino	Regular ed.	fall semester


*Note: Names in bold indicate core members of the group*

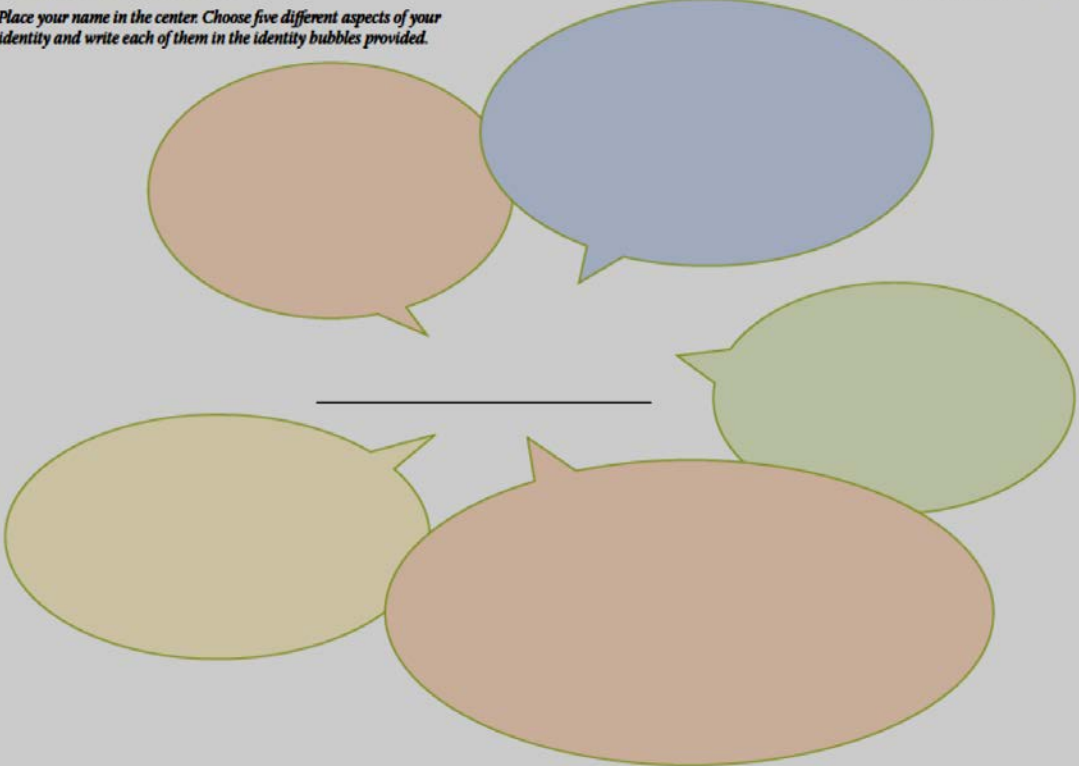
## APPENDIX C

### MULTICULTURAL SELVES

**My Multicultural Self**  
**MIDDLE/UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY**

*Place your name in the center. Choose five different aspects of your identity and write each of them in the identity bubbles provided.*

TEACHING TOLERANCE 



## **APPENDIX D**

### **ADAPTED FROM “THE DEEPEST FEAR” POEM**

<http://www.gamodei.com/uploads/9/7/4/7/9747485/90297.jpg?820>

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine as children do. It's not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own lights shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

## APPENDIX E

### GROUP WORK INSTRUCTIONS

#### **Group 1: YCfC Mission Statement**

What's our mission?

What do we think is important?

What do we stand for?

Who are we?

Jaylen, Jayanna, Santiago, Isabella, Kaila

#### **Group 2: YCfC Social Norms**

How do we want to operate our Thurs. Fri. meetings?

What is important to us?

What are 4-5 norms that will help make our time together better?

Quinten, Shawn, Regina, Daniel

#### **Group 3: YCfC December Service Project**

Who are we raising money for?

How do we raise money? Collect goods?

Who do we need to get permission from?

When should we do this?

Cameron, Ariana, Manuel

**APPENDIX F**  
**MISSION STATEMENT**

*We are the YC&C.*

*We are people who believe in ourselves.*

*We want to be successful.*

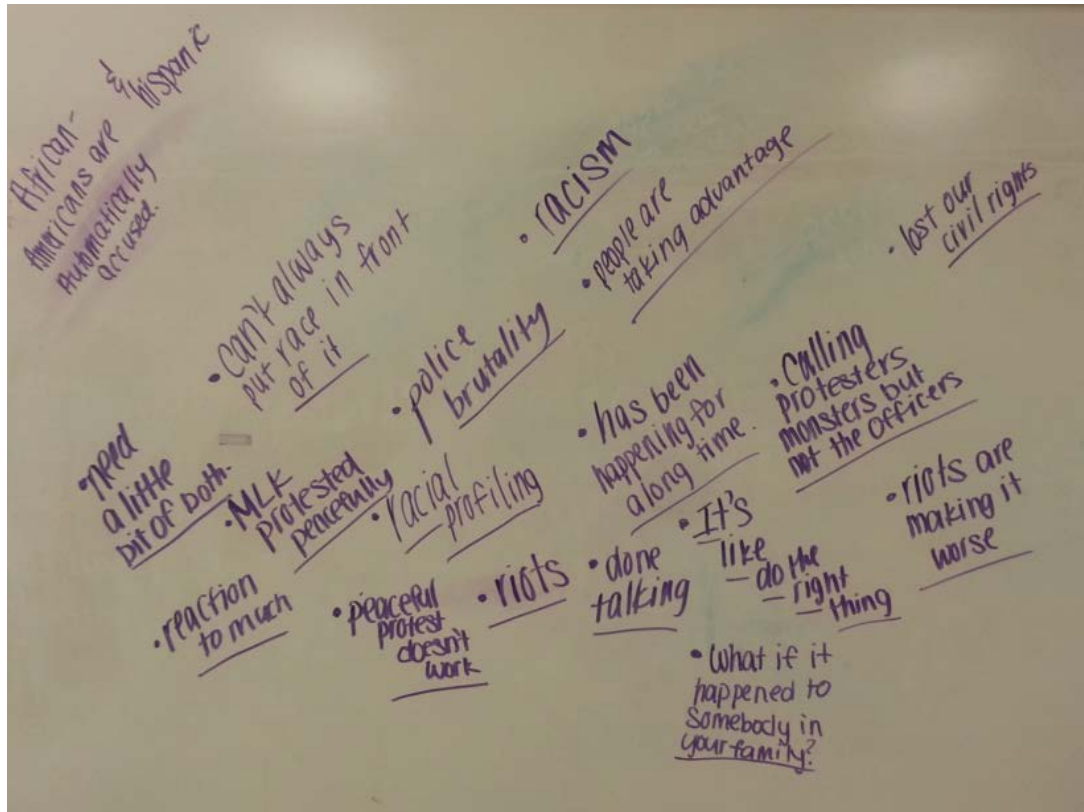
*Advocates.*

*Critical Thinkers.*

*We are a group of youth who believe in change.*

## APPENDIX G

### CHALLENGES FACING BLACK AND LATINO/A COMMUNITIES



## APPENDIX H

### INDIVIDUAL/FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### Individual Interview Questions

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Our goal today is to learn more about how youth feel about interacting with youth who are different (For example, different race/culture gender, or sexual orientation). I will ask you to discuss and share your experiences so please give me your honest opinion. Thank you for your participation.

- 1) Tell me about yourself? (Demographic information)
  - 2) Describe the people that you grew up around.
  - 3) How do you describe your identity? (Prompt for race/culture, class, gender)
  - 4) Tell me about your close friends (Probe about close friends who participants perceive as different). Follow up: How would you describe their identities?
  - 5) Talk to me about how your friends feel about socializing with \_\_\_\_\_(insert Blacks, Latino/as, or Asians)
  - 6) Talk to me about how you feel about socializing with \_\_\_\_\_(insert Blacks, Latino/as, or Asians)
  - 7) How do you feel about people from different cultures dating?
  - 8) Talk to me about how your families and friends feel about you interacting with youth who are different?
  - 9) I am going to tell you the name of a group of people and I want you to tell me adjectives or descriptions that come to mind about this group. (Asians, Blacks, Latinas/os, Whites)
  - 10) Is there anything you'd like to tell me about the topic that we haven't discussed?
-

## Focus Group Questions

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. Our goal today is to learn more about how youth feel about interacting with youth who are different (For example, different race/culture, social class, gender, or sexual orientation). I will ask you to discuss and share your experiences so please give me your honest opinion and be respectful of others' opinions during the discussion. If you decide to share a personal story about someone else, please use a pseudonym or another name for the person in your story. Thank you for your participation.

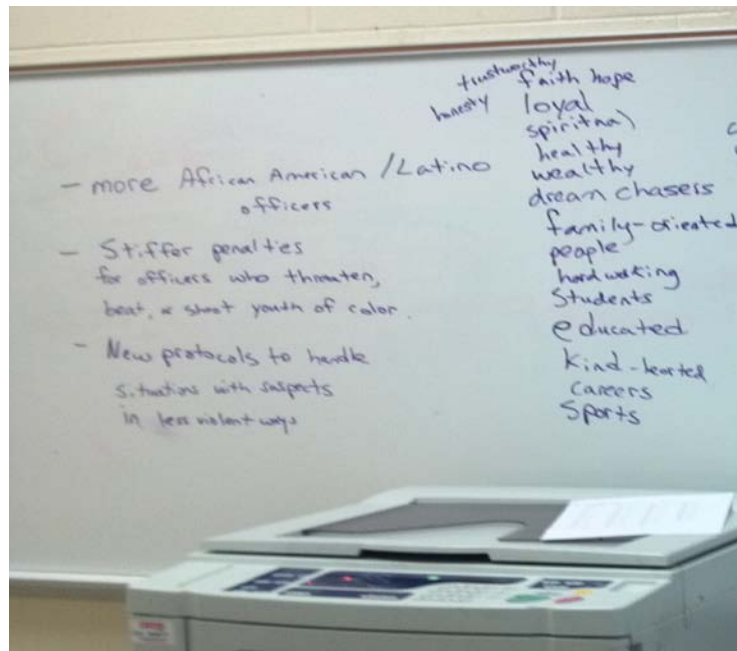
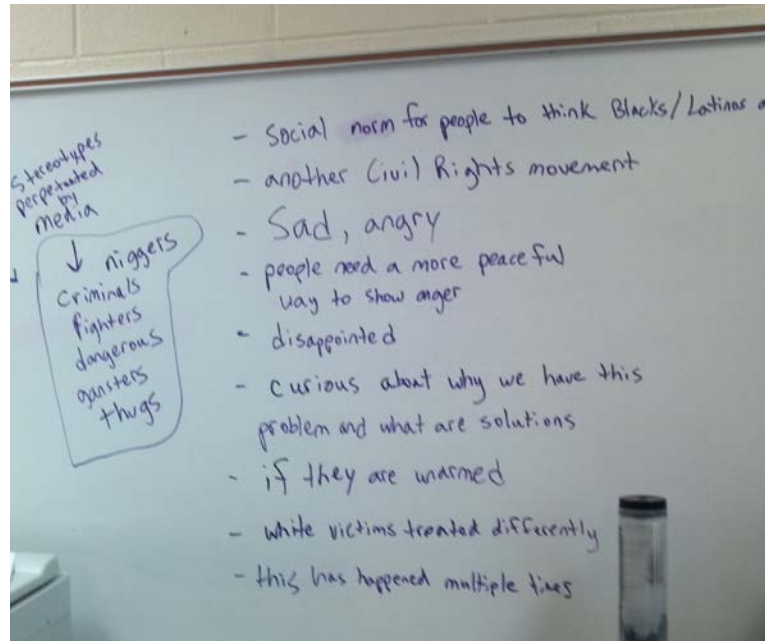
I would like to emphasize that your participation in this focus group is voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable, you have the right to leave the room or ask that the conversation be redirected. Thank you for your participation.

- 1) Talk to me about the interaction between Black, Latino/a and Asian youth at your school.
  - 2) Talk to me about the interaction between teachers and youth at your school.
  - 3) Are there groups of people that tend to hang out together or avoid each other? Talk to me about that.
  - 4) Do the youth at your school divide themselves into cliques? How would you describe these cliques?
  - 5) Do you see or experience discrimination among the students in your school? Tell me about that.
  - 6) When I worked at a high school, it seemed that students of different races or cultures didn't hang out. Do you see the same thing happening? If so, why do you think that is? What's so different about these groups?
-



## APPENDIX I

### GROUP BRAINSTORM FOR LETTER



## APPENDIX J

### LETTER FROM YCFCERS

TO: [REDACTED] PD Chief [REDACTED], Sheriff [REDACTED], Mayor [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Senator [REDACTED], Governor [REDACTED]

We the students of the Youth Coalition for Change (YCfC) and concerned persons of the [REDACTED] High School community petition our local and state leaders to support us in speaking out against police violence.

We are sad, angry, and disappointed about the deaths of unarmed black men across the nation at the hands of police officers. We have been doing research on youths' experiences with police officers. We learned about incidents where youth have been involved in illegal searches, harassment, and racial profiling.

We know that media stereotypes portray Blacks and Latinos as criminals, fighters, dangerous, gangsters, and thugs... BUT  
We know that we are honest, trustworthy, loyal, spiritual dream-chasers. We are family-oriented, hard-working people.

We want a peaceful way to show our anger and disappointment.  
We want our voices heard.  
We want to live in a peaceful society.  
We want to see CHANGE.

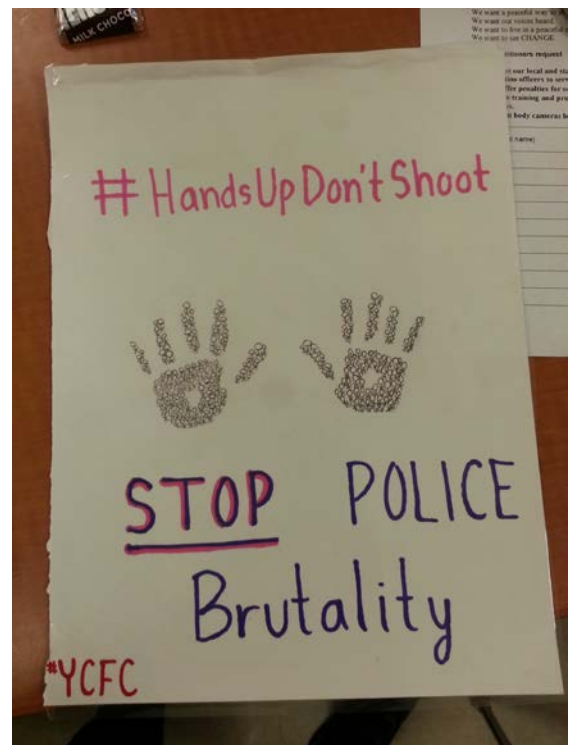
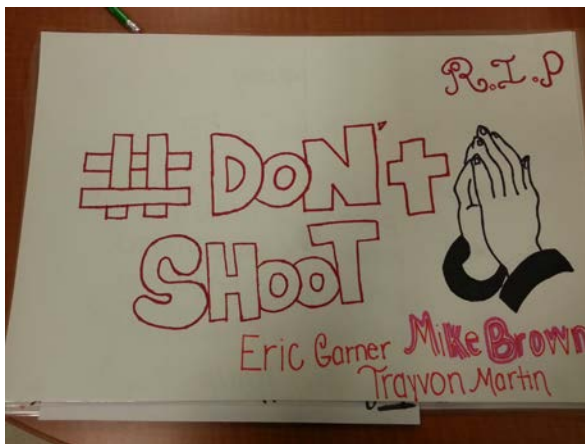
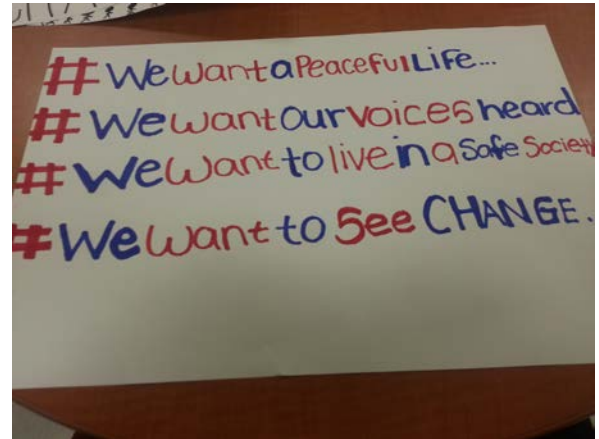
We the petitioners request

- That our local and state representatives recruit more African-American and Latino officers to serve in our communities.
- Stiffer penalties for officers who threaten, beat, and shoot unarmed individuals.
- New training and protocols that train officers to deal with suspects in less violent ways.
- That body cameras be used by all officers in our local and state communities.

NAME (Please print name)	SIGNATURE (Petitioner must sign his/her name)	ADDRESS (Please write full address)

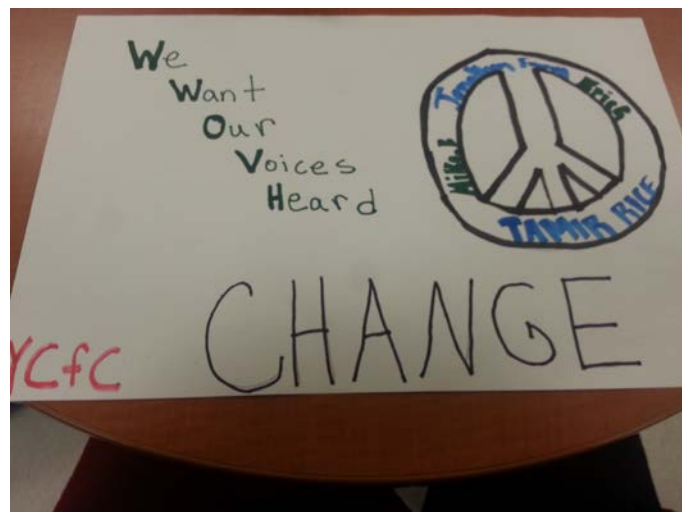
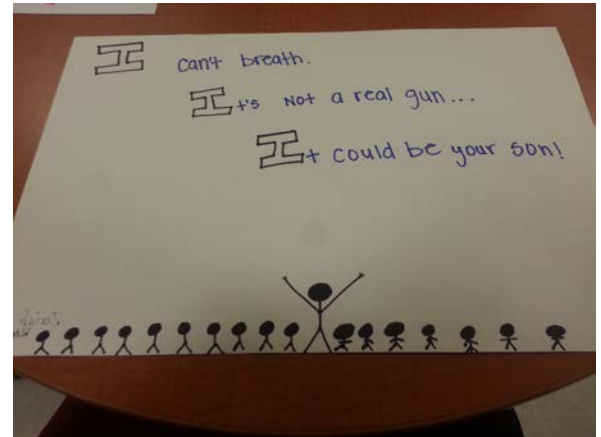
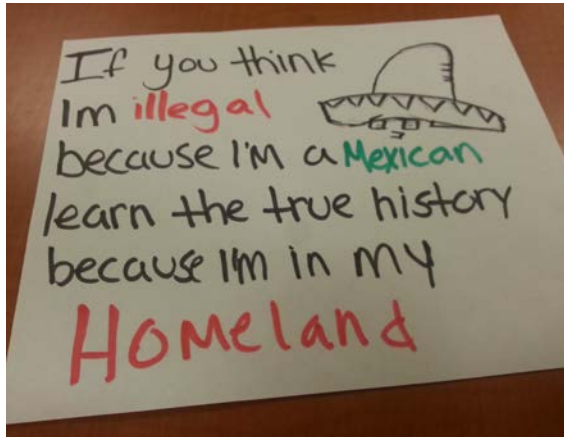
APPENDIX K

POSTER PROJECT



## APPENDIX L

### POSTER PROJECT CONTINUED



## APPENDIX M

### REACTIONS TO THE “UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITY RACE”

